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Split digraphs, fronted adverbials and the problems of later creative writing study

Let's start with some lower level news. There have been several recent criticisms of the way reading is taught and English is assessed in primary schools. One pictures an outraged editorial meeting at *The Guardian* with three of their writers – Michael Rosen, Gaby Hinsliff and Tim Lott - all railing against split digraphs and fronted adverbials, the parts of speech that a previous Education Minister left as 'compulsory teaching' for our 5-11 year olds. 'Get the digraph', I hear these journalists shout. More likely their reaction has been caused by little ones dear to them suffering on a daily basis. These are probably very good and apt linguistic terms. To my ill-educated, associative ear, they instantly suggest incontinence and lobotomy. They are not the sort of gifts all children appreciate or benefit from – with reports of older children breaking down in tears on being asked to write a piece of creative writing, not knowing how or where to start. It is good that this is now being addressed and a previous regime's apparently ill-researched policy has been found out.

The emphasis on naming parts of speech at too early an age is reputed to have stifled not only children's enthusiasm for writing but also even their basic language abilities. The split digraph is a term based on spelling, without reference to meaning or etymology. By talking of hat and hate together, the example that Rosen gives, a rightful visual, sonic, spelling association is established. But this has nothing to do with semantics, and might even create confusing associations for children: why are hats hated? Similarly, the slightly older child develops skills in identifying subordinate clauses that appear in front of main clauses within sentences – those fronted adverbials that make me rub my forehead. By identifying such parts of speech, apparently some children lose the ability or will to write – any sort of sentence.

My own primary school experience was lucky, an inner city haven where there were no labels. Or at least that's my recall. You were allowed to discover words, to collect them, to create, to write stories and poems, to play with language, following on from what you read or what was read to you. This was the predominant theme and how you learned. It was interrupted for a while by the distinctly non-educational and regimented preparation for the 11-plus, but then, after the barbarism of assessment was out of the way, I recall our class teacher really getting down to it. He divided us into tables of four and set us the task of writing a group novel. This is a story I've probably told too often, but I think it warrants retelling. Why does creativity have to sit outside modes of assessment and markers of progression?

Allowing language-play at primary level is imperative because if denied, the deficit will be felt – by those children and by the culture as a whole - at a later date. This is where we finally get to what I'm supposed to be talking about. Higher Education. The misguided policies in primary schools seem to me to reflect a wider debate about level and content within English more generally. English has recently been billed as a three-legged stool consisting of English Literature, English Language and Creative Writing. This year's *English: Shared Futures* conference (<http://www.englishsharedfutures.uk/>) is the culmination of this thinking. NAWE – largely in the person of Seraphima Kennedy – is a co-organiser of the event. I will be speaking at the conference on an international panel about the nature of Creative Writing research, and launching the updated version of the NAWE Creative Writing research benchmark statement. I will also be chairing a panel about the effects of Brexit on Creative Writing study. There will be several other NAWE panels, so I hope to see many of you there.

This combined conference is all positive and suggests that Creative Writing has finally arrived in Higher Education – we now have a Subject Association (NAWE) and a QAA-authorized teaching benchmark, in line with other disciplines. But with the Creative Writing A-Level currently in its death throes, and these tales of badly thought through primary level policies, I wonder how students will be equipped to study Creative Writing at university level in the future. What preparation will they have had in their previous education? And just how does the three-legged stool operate within HE institutions? The relationship between English Studies and Creative Writing should be straightforward – you would think. The currency of English studies – language and literary artefacts – are also prime tools in Creative Writing’s active study, its canvas, colour and back catalogue, if you like. The connection is obvious but when it comes to co-habiting in the academy, in one faculty, often within one department, and with all the rigours and constraints of qualifications, research assessments and subject definitions at stake, it can get complicated and fraught.

Such tensions are a common aspect of many Creative Writing academics’ working lives. The relationship with English can be perfectly harmonious but sometimes it is not. It can be ridden with conflict and ongoing difficulties that are not necessarily to do with subject definitions per se. Creative Writing is often the newer subject area, with less well-established staff hierarchies and numbers, but with a burgeoning student population. It is therefore inevitably taught by a greater proportion of temporary contract and associate staff. Statistics suggest that the popularity of English qualifications is waning slightly but that Creative Writing is on the up. So these staffing inequities are likely to persist and become more prominent. As mentioned in previous columns, the NAWE HE Committee working group led by Celia Brayfield has now ratified the ‘Casual Contracts Code of Practice’. It can be accessed via the NAWE website. Please spread the word and tell your Head of Department and institution’s HR department about this guidance. See <https://www.nawe.co.uk/writing-in-education/writing-at-university/contracts.html>

On student numbers: some might say Creative Writing is too popular. Its newness and its numbers stretch institutions’ strategic capacities. From NAWE’s perspective and those of us working in the HE sector, this ‘stretching’ is a good thing, despite its complications. But many tend to ignore what the popularity reveals: a human need to use language in personally significant ways, in nuanced, creative and playful ways, and to tell stories. I recently visited Brazil on a research trip – Unicamp, a university in Campinas, near São Paulo. In a country currently beset by political strife and false stories, I was first of all impressed by the fact that the students, quite unlike in the UK, were fully funded, complete with maintenance grants, tuition fees and subsidised campus amenities. I thought I would struggle to explain the principles of Creative Writing in a country where it doesn’t seem to exist as a discipline. One or two were sceptical, but overall the research students appeared receptive and eager, as if they had been waiting for just such an approach. I’ve seen that appetite in many faces before, in many different venues: the face of Creative Writing’s appeal. It is often related to past educational experiences, both good and bad, the suggestion that has somehow been retained from an individual’s previous life, that writing might be a route to something. I’m not sure I thought that at the age of 11, faced with the prospect of writing a novel. But I knew I was excited at the opportunity, and on reflection I feel lucky that I didn’t have to battle with digraphs, split or otherwise.

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