

A Century of Teaching Creative Writing in Schools

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Introduction

Our chapter focuses upon the nuances and affordances of the Newbolt Report, looking in particular at the recommendations for the teaching of creative writing. It shows how Newbolt offers us a vision of the creative writing teacher in schools, indicating that such a teacher should be well read, sensitive, cultured, passionate, and open-minded. The report is surprisingly liberal in its views, offering no prescribed method for its teaching, but rather suggests that teachers need to have acquired a set of practices in order to be effective. Our key questions which we answer are:

- What are the recommendations in the Newbolt Report for the teaching of creative writing?
- What can the Newbolt Report tell us about the teaching of creative writing in the education system today, at primary, secondary and university level? How relevant is the report?
- What are the echoes of Newbolt in our education system today?

In answering these questions, we connect Newbolt's recommendations with recent research into creative writing conducted by educational experts such as Teresa Cremin, Sue Dymoke and Lorna Smith, exploring the similarities and differences between their findings and Newbolt's recommendations. There are some fascinating points of comparison to be made between their work and Newbolt. Newbolt's chapter on English in Commercial Life in Newbolt is analysed, and in doing so we explore the ways in which creative writing can be made relevant for vocational education. Throughout our analysis, we compare and contrast contemporary creative writing practices and processes with those discussed and promoted in the report.

The Newbolt Report on Teaching Creative Writing

An exploration of Newbolt's general principles, aims and values in relation to creative writing

Henry Newbolt, the main author of the report, was, it must be stressed, a poet (amongst other posts), and not a member of the educational establishment. This contrasts sharply with current practice in many jurisdictions, where it is ‘on message’ educational ‘experts’ – favoured journalists, academics, think-tank members etc – who populate the committees of reports which will have a direct bearing upon what happens in educational establishments. For example, the authors of the most recent National Curriculum for England and Wales (2013), a so-called ‘Expert Panel’ (Department for Education 2013), was chaired by the academic Tim Oates. He, along with the Ministers of State, was instrumental in making sure there was a heavy focus on the teaching of grammar and a narrowing of the English curriculum (Pollard 2012); this is something Newbolt nearly hundred years before was very critical of.

In stark contrast to a technocratic figure like Oates, Henry Newbolt was one of the most famous poets of his day and his poetic spirit infuses the report; he had a very different conception of what the curriculum can and should do from many of the policy-makers in education today. This is vividly conveyed not only in the report’s content but also in its rhetorical flourishes, the like of which rarely appear in modern day educational tomes.

The choice of Newbolt was possibly analogous to appointing a best-selling but ‘literary’ novelist like Sebastian Faulks or Robert Harris to chair the United Kingdom’s National Curriculum’s Expert Panel. Like these figures, Newbolt was not rigidly conventional, but nor was he an iconoclast. As well as writing he worked at the Foreign Office during the war and was an advisor to Asquith. But while he was very much an establishment figure, possibly in this way similar to writers like Faulks and Harris, he took an interest in the radical and had a measured sympathy for revolutionary ideas as we will see. The Newbolt report (abbreviated to Newbolt for the purposes of this article) is, in relation to the teaching of creative writing at least, a fascinating case study of a ‘middle-of-the-road’ sensibility mediating some of the radical pedagogical thinking that engaged the main author but did not fully persuade him.

The Newbolt report places great emphasis upon the ‘art of writing English’: it sits alongside reading and speaking as central components of the English curriculum (Newbolt 1921: Roberts 2019: 214). The report both established and emphasised the importance of a literary canon and is, in some ways, traditionalist in its sensibilities (Roberts 2019: 215). For

example, Newbolt proposes using certain ‘well-chosen’ passages ‘of prose’ in the classroom in order to:

call attention to the virtues of a model of style, to enlarge the vocabulary, to teach construction and arrangement. Imaginative subjects, too long neglected, are today sometimes used to excess. When they evoke any real imagination, they are more than justified; but the tendency to choose a subject which makes no demand upon the reasoning powers must be restrained. (1921: 110)

So while there is a focus upon establishing an emergent literary canon, the report as a whole celebrates a wide diversity of texts – including poems written in dialect, experimental fiction and drama – and urges teachers to use them in the classroom with ‘real imagination’ (110).

Writing and reading are perceived as reciprocal activities, with the reader being very much ‘in’ the writer (Barrs 2000). To a certain extent, the report advocates a ‘rationalist’ approach to the teaching of writing. It states that choosing subjects for imaginative writing which make ‘no demand upon the reasoning powers must be restrained’ (110). This said, there is also a ‘Romantic’ spirit elsewhere in the report which suggests a zest for the passionate and the emotional. In stressing the need for a rationalist approach, Newbolt may be expressing an anxiety about Modernism and modernist writing. He was writing it at a time, in the early 1920s, when experimentalists such as Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce and Gertrude Stein were coming to the fore. In contrast, Henry Newbolt wrote verse still redolent of the Victorian era, some of which is only remembered today because it reads like patriotic propaganda, such as his most famous poem, *Vitai Lampada* (1892). Here Newbolt writes about a British soldier facing certain death remembering playing cricket at his public school:

The river of death has brimmed his banks,
And England's far, and Honour a name,
But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks:
'Play up! play up! and play the game!'

In a certain sense, the poem is about the importance of what Newbolt perceives to be a moral education.

The report is consistently progressive at certain points (Robert 2019: 215). It cites a number of notable teachers of the time when illustrating what it distinguishes to be good practice in the teaching of writing:

Exercises in both descriptive and imaginative writing, as well as practice in verse composition, in letter writing, and in dialogue, are common in the early stages. Many interesting experiments, such as those described to us by Mr. Caldwell Cook (Perse School), Mr. Sharwood Smith (Newbury School), Mr. Gerald Dowse (Liverpool Collegiate School), and Mr. G. N. Pocock (Royal Naval College, Dartmouth), have been tried with a view to encouraging self-expression. These include debates, improvised dialogues and dramatic scenes, and ten-minute lectures by pupils, in class as well as in out-of-school hours. Some schools possess a room where the absence of desks and the presence of a stage facilitate the production of drama, and where well-chosen pictures on the walls give an environment favourable to literary art. (Newbolt 1921: 104)

As Roberts (2019) points out, Newbolt argues that imaginative writing and drama – both elements in the teaching of creative writing – should be developed. What is striking here is the vibrant, dialogic classroom that Newbolt is urging English teachers to create, stressing that they should include dynamic activities like debates, improvisation and turning the classroom into a theatre.

Connecting the Newbolt Report with Teaching Creative Writing a century later

What can the Newbolt Report tell us about the teaching of creative writing in the education system today, at primary, secondary and university level? How relevant is the report?

What are the echoes of Newbolt in our education system today?

Newbolt's discussion of the teaching of poetry is instructive. The report states:

All delight in poetry may be easily killed by ill-judged selection of pieces, undue insistence on perfect memorising, destructive explanations, and ill-concealed indifference, or even distaste. The teacher for whom poetry has no message should not attempt to take it with a class, unless, perhaps, he can catch from the children themselves some of the freshness of their feeling for a ballad or a play. But his loss will be great. There is no lesson like the poetry lesson for producing that intimacy between teacher and class which makes school a happy place. (1921: 87)

Clearly Newbolt would be in conflict with many teachers of poetry today. Research into contemporary uses of poetry in the classroom indicate that there is often an emphasis upon 'technical analysis, modelling strategies, pupil passivity and exam preparation' which means that the 'potential of poetry remains elusive' (Hennessey et al 2020: 3). For example, it appears that many teachers do not read poetry aloud in the classroom (Dymoke et al. 2015:

10) and there is a ‘loss of personal interest in poetry’ amongst them (Hennessey et al. 2020: 3). In other words, the very things Newbolt was criticising – ‘ill-conceived indifference, even distaste’, mindless rote-learning, ‘ill-judged selection of pieces’ – still mar the teaching of poetry and creative writing today.

Recently, in England and Wales and in other jurisdictions there has been both at the policy level and in academic fields a renewed focus upon the teaching of grammar at the expense of creative, more open-ended approaches to the teaching of writing. Researchers and politicians (Department for Education 2013; Myhill et al. 2013; Giovanelli 2016; Cushing 2018) have promoted the use of what might be termed the ‘meta-language’ of grammar in English lessons. Cushing (2018), Giovanelli (2016) and Myhill (2013) have offered creative ways of using grammar terminology when teaching poetry, both in its analysis and creation. However, Newbolt still serves as a warning to them and others who seek to bring overt linguistic terms into the school classroom; such explanations can be ‘destructive’ in that they can ‘destroy the freshness of their feeling for a ballad or a play’. Newbolt’s belief that the teaching of grammar is ‘a territory full of pitfalls’ (1921: 265 iii) and his wish to keep the teaching of grammar ‘simple’ (1921: 293) means that his report remains a salient challenge to advocates of integrating the use of grammar terminology into creative writing lessons. The report supplies quotations from English teachers. One voice which is particularly striking is this one which argues passionately for the advancement of meaningful talk in the classroom:

‘We think that a great deal of time spent in grammar, spelling, punctuation would be far better used in the study of English literature in its broader aspects. Only a really free atmosphere in the school will give sufficient opportunities for the spoken word’ (1921: 130)

Newbolt’s vision of the English classroom for young children is one which is full of storytelling and dramatic play. He writes:

If the adoption of play-making, as an exercise in writing, became more general, some part of the energy of teacher and pupil might be diverted from the unprofitable task of premature essay writing. In a sense children are primitive beings, and the essay is not a primitive form. Epics existed before essays; the world had a large body of narrative and dramatic literature before it arrived at the essay; and yet it is precisely this difficult and fragile form of composition that immature pupils are expected to produce. Children know what a story or a play is long before they know what an essay is. They can understand writing a story

for the class magazine, or a play for a class performance, but, for them, the 'essay' has no purpose (311).

Here again, we find Newbolt steering away from putting too much emphasis upon analysis. For Newbolt, creative writing is a crucial building block for learning: 'Children know what a story or a play is long before they know what an essay is' (311). He argues powerfully that storytelling needs to have primacy before the 'difficult and fragile form' of the essay is imposed upon them. He anticipates here some very modern thinking about the ways in which stories help learning through social bonding, emphasising getting children to write for the class magazine (Forchtner et al. 2020).

Newbolt's praise for the use of the spoken word, drama and more free-wheeling English composition exercises chime with Sue Dymoke's research into poetry which illustrates how Spoken Word artists can enthuse disadvantaged children for poetry by showing them how poetry can enable 'young people to understand that there are many potential subjects for writing and poetry can be a vehicle through which these can be explored in provocative and challenging ways' (Dymoke 2017: 234). The Arts-funded Spoken Word Education Programme (SWEP) linked to the MA Creative Writing at and Education at Goldsmiths ran from 2012-2017 in London schools.

Through mentoring, professional development, seminars and placements, spoken word educators bridged the gap between poet and teacher. Responding to a lack of creativity in the curriculum and a plethora of academic and emotional needs demonstrated by secondary school students, the programme placed spoken word educators in schools as a permanent force within English departments (Hirsch & Macleroy, 2019: 2).

The Newbolt report's highlighting of experimental teachers such as Henry Caldwell Cook and others (103) is similar to this research into Spoken Word Education and recent research recognising the affordances of multimodal composition and creativity (Macleroy, 2016) in that new approaches to teaching creative writing are offered as possible models for making English teaching more engaging. Caldwell Cook's influential book *The Play Way, an Essay in Educational Method* (1966) remains a challenge to traditional models of teaching:

He told his pupils that education was a journey of their choice, to be travelled at their own pace, and also renounced the teacher's traditional authoritarianism. His book includes drawings and photographs of pupils indulging their imaginations, making plays, writing ballads, and

lecturing on their interests and hobbies. He actively encouraged and joined in folk-dancing, swimming, camping and scouting. (Cunningham & Yamasaki 2018: 25)

Newbolt praises the Perse school in Cambridge, where Caldwell Cook taught, highlighting covertly Caldwell Cook's innovative pedagogy. The report says:

At the Perse School, Cambridge, Latin is not begun till 12½ or 13, and Greek not till about 16. In the Lower Forms, accordingly, it is possible to give special attention to English Literature and Composition. Creative work in the form of lectures by the boys, the writing of verse, and the writing and acting of plays, is a great feature in this school. (108)

Here we have a picture of a thriving creative community. Pupils have the chance to take on the mantle of different creative writing roles, writing 'lectures', 'verse', and 'writing and acting of plays'. They appear to be part of a creative community of practice (Dobson & Stephenson 2017: Cremin & Oliver 2017). Newbolt's championing of the arts is in stark contrast to educational policies in much of the so called 'developed' world now, where arts programmes and courses have been systemically cut from the curriculum, both in schools and universities (Barnes 2020: Ruebain 2019). There have been dramatic declines in pupils studying dance, drama, music and other creative subjects in England and Wales for example which have been the direct result of government policy designed to promote STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) subjects (Ruebain 2019). All of which Newbolt would have detested. Newbolt was an ardent advocate of an arts-based education, it was 'the torch of life'. Citing the poet and school inspector Matthew Arnold, Newbolt states 'Culture unites classes' (6). For Newbolt, making an arts-based curriculum central to a child's education was a moral imperative.

Indeed, above all, Newbolt celebrates teaching where 'English is treated as an art, a means of creative expression, a record of human experience' (11). Newbolt stresses the need for 'correction' – in all its forms -- to be 'tempered by methods that foster the creative impulse (75) and that this impulse comes 'chiefly in writing poems and plays' (93). Newbolt is at pains to point out that 'plenty of experiments should be tried' (183) and that creative writing in 'prose and verse' could be taught with a view to developing students' 'literary sensibility' (183). The picture then is of schools where creative writing is not only developed as an end in itself – for the sheer pleasure of it – but also as a tool to deepen 'literary sensibility'. To do this schools need to become research hubs. The vision of school then is very different from

the one that policy makers have of schools in the 21st century where what Pasi Sahlberg terms the ‘Global Educational Reform Movement (GERM)’ (Sahlberg 2012) has taken hold, leading to ‘increased standardisation, a narrowing of the curriculum to focus on core subjects/knowledge, the growth of high stakes accountability and the use of corporate management practices (Fuller & Stevenson 2019: 1). In the Newbolt report, knowledge of teaching and learning is provisional and investigation is encouraged. The more tedious aspects of education, such as rote-learning, essay writing and grammar teaching, are not entirely ignored but certainly downgraded in favour of story, script and express writing and the use of drama in the classroom to foster creative thinking and engagement. Newbolt cites Matthew Arnold to great effect in the report in this regard:

Nor is it surprising that Matthew Arnold should lament, as he does in his reports, the absence from the schools of genuine culture. Speaking of the pupil teachers in 1852, he says: 'Young men, whose knowledge of grammar, of the minutest details of geographical and historical facts, and above all, of mathematics, is surprising, often cannot paraphrase a plain passage of prose or poetry without totally misapprehending it, or write half a page of composition on any subject without falling into gross blunders of taste and expression.' (47)

Like Arnold, Newbolt advocated that the working classes should be taught to write expressive ‘compositions’ and develop an appreciation of poetry. In Chapter V on ‘English in Commercial and Industrial Life, with special reference to continuation and technical education’, Newbolt’s zest for a liberal education for all is impressed upon the reader. The report stresses that ‘the needs of business’ must be strictly subordinated to those of ‘a liberal education’ (129), claiming that businesses are supportive of this aim (129). This is in sharp contrast to current GERM orthodoxy where an ‘adult needs’ agenda of training young people for the world of work in further education (post-16 education) has supplanted any requirement for a ‘liberal education’ (Bailey & Unwin 2014). The Newbolt report states that business leaders believed that ‘the teaching of literature advocated as an essential preparation for a business career’ (130) and that the emphasis on ‘Commercial English’ – what now is called ‘functional skills’ or ‘literacy’ – was ‘meaningless business jargon’ (131), according to one anonymously quoted business leader. The report looks in depth at the problems with vocational education and the teaching of English and advocates a creative approach which starts with the ‘familiar and understood’:

English, unrelated to the vocation or environment of the part-time student may appear to him a thing alien, unintelligible, forcibly imposed upon him. If, however, we begin with what is familiar and understood, we at once gain his willing co-operation in a journey of spiritual adventure which has no limits. At the same time, there are cases where the appeal through simple imaginative literature, in the form of poetry or plays, can be made at once. (137)

Newbolt encourages English teachers to draw upon what some modern researchers have called ‘funds of knowledge’ (González et al. 2005): localised knowledge of what people know of their families, homes and communities. The report celebrates the teaching of dialects, particularly when using poetry (144). In terms of fostering creative writing, Newbolt provides an extensive account of an ‘Instructor in English at the Royal Naval College’ (151) who taught vocational education (14-17 year olds):

All would leave Dartmouth to go to sea possessed of a good knowledge of English literature, and most of them would be extremely keen on poetry. Boys were shy about producing their own verses, but it was remarkable how many boys showed him their verses, if he promised to tell nobody else about them.' (152)

So while Newbolt is more reticent about the need to teach creative writing to working class ‘boys’ than it is in stressing its importance for privately-educated children (such as at the Perse school), it clearly celebrates instances of when it is successfully carried out. Newbolt advocates the necessity of what might be termed ‘creative reading’ – reading literature imaginatively:

We declare that poetry and drama should be as free of the factory and the workshop as they were of the village green and moot-hall in the middle ages. And we look chiefly to a humanised industrial education to bring this about. (166)

Once again Newbolt is arguing against functional approaches to teaching poetry and drama, rhetorically stating that reading should be taught in a ‘humanised’ way within the country’s industrial areas. In other words, teachers should not be expected to prepare working class children purely for factory life by making them functionally literate, but that they should make them creatively literate by learning through experience. As Lorna Smith states, ‘What the Report actually goes on to promote is a creative pedagogy based on experiential learning’ through the ‘three modes of talk, reading and writing’ (Smith 2019: 260).

In his section of the report devoted to Literature and Adult Education (Chapter VIII), Newbolt places a special emphasis upon the importance of new 'universities'. It states:

The rise of modern Universities has accredited an ambassador of poetry to every important capital of industrialism in the country, and upon his shoulders rests a responsibility greater we think than is as yet generally recognised. The Professor of Literature in a University should be - and sometimes is, as we gladly recognise - a missionary in a more real and active sense than any of his colleagues. (259)

The refrain of promoting an Arnoldian view of literature is implicit in Newbolt's suggestion that the 'Professor of Literature' should be a 'missionary'. The Professor's mission should be to encourage the reading of English literature across the numerous British colonies because of its ability to unite cultures. Thus, we can see, the enlightened, passionate teaching of literature for Newbolt is akin to an evangelical religion; it has a unique role to play in bringing not only classes together but also countries across the British Empire. While there is no doubt strong colonial discourses at play here, it is worth possibly noting that a modern Newbolt may well be supporting the teaching of literature from diverse cultures as a way of bringing people across the globe together and aiding understanding between cultures. In this sense, an enlightened, progressive literary expert like Dr Dierdre Osborne at Goldsmiths, who has written an excellent guide on Black British Literature (2017) for teenagers, might fit Newbolt's criteria of an academic who reaches out beyond the walls of the university to school children and teachers.

Newbolt exhorts that examination boards should 'bring about a closer relationship between scholars and creative artists on the one hand and students and teachers on the other, to the advantage of both' (186).

This diverges starkly with current educational orthodoxies where artists feel that their pleas for a more creative curriculum and forms of assessment have been ignored (Morris 2020). Newbolt could be echoing the views of writers like Philip Pullman (TES 2015) when he writes:

Mere knowledge of literary history profits little. What is desired is the wide diffusion of taste, of critical faculty and even of creative power, such as have produced popular poetry in the past (275)

Later, in Chapter IX 'Aspects of English Teaching' Newbolt puts a real emphasis on the importance of teacher subject knowledge in much the same way that Cremin and Oliver do in

their *Teachers as Writers* report (2017). It is not dry facts about literature that the English teacher should know but:

it is a primary necessity that those who are to introduce children to the great humanity of poetry, history and romance, with all the philosophy of life involved in them, should themselves already have attained some degree of intimacy with creative minds, and be able to speak of their work not in the letter but in the spirit (340)

The term 'practice' is used 61 times in the report – in different guises – but the overall message is that both teachers and pupils must 'practice' both reading and writing creatively regularly, and these two things are intimately interlinked. Children will not be able to write well – particularly creatively – unless they are taught by 'practiced' teachers and have plenty of practice themselves. Exactly the same thoughts are echoed by recent research into creative writing (Cremin & Oliver 2017: Gilbert 2016: 2017).

Recommendations for Teaching Creative Writing

So, what would Newbolt recommend today as productive ways for teaching creative writing?

Based on our interpretation of the report, we would suggest these key points:

The values of a liberal education should permeate the education system at all levels; the 'divine spirit' of poetry (Newbolt 1921: 166) should suffuse English teaching in schools, colleges and universities. Everything else seems to flow from an adoption of this value. In this sense, the spirit of creativity should be present in all English teaching (Smith 2019: 260).

Meaningful creative writing starts with meaningful reading. This is where English teachers' subject knowledge is of paramount importance. English teachers need to be passionately committed readers of literature and impart that enthusiasm in the classroom. This is a particularly striking aspect of the report which Newbolt returns repeatedly to.

Storytelling should be the basis for writing, thinking and debating about more abstract topics. Newbolt argues that particularly in the early years of schooling, children need to learn to write through telling stories, not by writing abstract essays which demotivate them.

Creative experimentation should be encouraged amongst teachers, particularly where creative writing is concerned. This means that the concepts, strategies and aims of progressive educators like Caldwell Cook should be trialled and reviewed. In particular, Newbolt draws upon Caldwell Cook's work to show how drama techniques can be used to foster creative writing.

Celebrating pupils' creative writing is vital. Pupils should perform their own plays and verse and have this valued by their teachers.

English teachers should draw upon pupils' funds of knowledge, particularly where continuing/technical education is concerned. Pupils should be free to write about their own lives in essays, plays and verse, read literature in their own local dialects and write in dialect where appropriate.

Creative writers, academics, school teachers and examination boards should all cooperate to formulate creative, meaningful curricula and assessments.

Academics should be activists for literature and creativity in the wider culture.

These 'headlines' which sum up the views promoted in Newbolt show just how relevant the report is today; many of these points continue to be challenges for policy makers, academics and teachers today. Is it time to take what the report suggests is good practice much more seriously?

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