

# Review of Creativity in the English Curriculum: Historical Perspectives and Future Directions by Lorna Smith

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Lorna Smith's book could not be timelier. It is published at a time when creativity – in all its manifold forms and iterations – is under serious attack in educational jurisdictions across the world. As she points out in her autobiographical introduction, the era when educational policy makers actively encouraged creative approaches to the teaching of English have long gone and now politicians like Nick Gibb, a recent long-serving Education minister in the Coalition and Conservative government, set the agenda. A toxic combination of unenlightened, ill-informed education policy, the Covid pandemic, a teacher-recruitment and training crisis has led to certain hard-fought basics being eradicated. Creative, research-informed approaches to reading and writing have been replaced by rote-learning, formulaic recipes for writing (such as Point Evidence Explanation) and death-by-PowerPoint presentations of English literature and language.

Smith details how and why this has happened in her excellent historical analysis of creativity in the English curriculum. It is not a long book, but it feels exhaustive: she seems miraculously to cover all bases in a number of weighty, heavily referenced academic chapters. She also throws in some creative playscripts which explore the issues in a more imaginative fashion.

The academic sections are very readable and illuminating: her language is precise, clear and easy to follow. Her chapter 'What is creativity and why does it matter?' is open-minded and fair. In it, she critiques conceptions of creativity, and in doing so explores religious, philosophical and literary conceptions of creativity. Her explorations of big 'C' and little 'c' conceptions of creativity, drawing upon the important work of Anna Craft, provide a democratic framework for examining the subject. Big 'C' creativity involves considering culturally significant texts and events, while the little 'c' is about celebrating creativity in everyday life. This dualism is helpful to the extent that it affords Smith the chance to reconnoitre notions of 'high culture' and its relationship to creativity, while also pointing out that an English teacher's job is often about celebrating and fostering the little 'c' in their pupils' lives and writing: everyday acts of problem-solving, of thinking 'out of the box', of reading, writing and speaking in imaginative ways.

Successive chapters after this investigate how the subject of English emerged from the ideas and work of the Romantic movement and Victorian educationalists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, establishing the study of English as a subject in itself. Enlightened reports, theorists, teachers, teacher-educators and

teachers' organisations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Henry Newbolt, the Plowden and Bullock reports, the National Association for the Teaching of English) all contributed towards what Smith argues is the 'flowering of creative English'. Subsequently of course, the dreaded National Curriculum (1988) was introduced and a continuous process of centralisation and authoritarian political control lead to creative English being 'cabined, cribbed, confined' over the succeeding decades. It is a familiar argument to anyone who has taught English in the last thirty years, but it is well-told and Smith fills in many gaps by exploring lesser known reports, events and thinkers such as the Kingman report and the All Our Futures Report: Creativity, Culture and Education (1999), which led in part to the now disbanded Creative Partnerships, an innovative initiative which promoted collaboration between teachers and creative artists.

As mentioned, it is the creative scripts which are the most unusual part of the book. They are entertaining and bring the topic alive: the theme of creativity suits this form. Basing the conversations on transcripts of 'real' conversations, Smith weaves together teachers' 'real' words into a concise, dialogic three-act play which bring together English pedagogues of varying experiences: trainees, long-standing teachers, teacher-educators etc. These educators discuss vital topics connected with teaching English. Here are two teachers talking about the teaching of English and the world of work:

Anne: ...Education should prepare them for work, of course – whether that be become a poet or and work for a FSTE 100 company – but that's not all of it.

Alex: Yeah! The economy is important, but where's the balance?...Where is fulfilment? Where is confidence? (p. 99)

The scripts curiously explode the issues which were traversed in the academic chapters, bringing them to life in a vivid, embodied fashion: it feels like passionate people, who have devoted their lives to teaching and expression, are debating matters which are of vital importance to them. These semi-fictional characters discuss and argue about what creativity is (Act 1), how policy plays out in practice (Act 2) and possible futures for English teaching and creativity (Act 3). The scripts would make a wonderful resource for teacher-education sessions: they could be read in groups and then the discussion could be discussed, very meta!

My only caveat would be that it was difficult to keep track of who was speaking at times, I kept having to refer back to the cast list on p. 91 to remind myself of who each character's identity was.

Smith has thrown down the gauntlet here, and put creativity back centre stage in the English curriculum. All English teachers in the United Kingdom should read this book; it is, in effect, a history of our professional souls! Furthermore, any self-respecting teacher-educator of English teachers should encourage their trainees to read it. Many trainees will probably use it as a brilliant crib which summarises the vital debates in English teaching over the last forty years. Very little is missed out in terms of the UK perspective: most significant cultural and policy shifts are critically examined and contextualised.

The one area that I would have liked to have read more about were decolonising perspectives. There are nods throughout to the role that colonial thinking and pedagogies have played in shaping English teaching, both on the micro and macro level, but there is no systematic engagement with this vital topic. The Black Lives Matter movement and recent scholarship and educational work around decolonising the curriculum has changed the debate significantly. Let us not forget that the word 'English' derives from the Angles and the Saxons who colonised the British isles in AD 500; their imposition of their Germanic dialect led to the eradication of indigenous Celtic languages and the

formation of Angloland (England in modern parlance) and Old English. English evolved because of Germanic people colonising what we now think of as England. Centuries later, the teaching of English was mobilised in the colonial period to subjugate the colonised; the first English exams arose in colonised India for indigenous people to enter the Indian colonial civil service. As recent research published in this journal and elsewhere indicates English is still used as a form of oppression against people whose ancestors have come from the former colonies. The annihilation, marginalisation and belittling of creative English teaching comes, in part, from a mind-set shaped by colonial discourses, from an outlook which believes that white rich men, educated in Britain's public schools, know best and that their culture and tastes should be imposed upon everyone else. It is little changed from the arrogance of colonial educators in the Victorian period. Lurking underneath this colonial approach is an epistemic violence which furiously tries to destroy creativity because it is so threatening to its value systems, its fake hierarchies, its lame literary canons, and its ill-informed and lazy prejudices. English teaching needs to be properly decolonised.

The last chapter of this illuminating history suggests ways of moving forward but eschews such a political approach, and instead highlights certain pedagogical strategies which are all commendable: more discussion and groupwork, more drama, more reading and writing for pleasure, and wider and more diverse range of literature to use in the classroom. Smith points out that it is the enlightened initiatives of the past that we must turn to, and renew and refresh them. I couldn't agree more. Beyond being a very useful primer for English teachers, this book is also important starting point for a wider conversation about why and how we can nurture creativity in English teaching.