



True grit

Daniel Xerri believes that teachers need to grasp the nettle and turn themselves into confident writers.

Each chapter of the novel *The Truth About the Harry Quebert Affair* by Joël Dicker is prefaced with a piece of advice that the eponymous college professor gives to the protagonist and narrator, Marcus Goldman. Quebert is an established writer who shares his wisdom about the craft of writing with the novice author he has long treated as his protégé. One of these pieces of advice is that the most important lesson Marcus could learn from him is knowing how to fail, or ‘fall’ as he puts it. He goes on to say: *‘The day writing gives meaning to your life, you will be a true writer. Until that happens, whatever you do, don’t be afraid of falling.’*

Long after finishing the novel, that statement continued to resonate with me, partly because of my ongoing research on teacher creativity. This article explores how perseverance and stamina, or ‘grit’, is crucial to teachers’ identity as confident writers, especially if they want to engage in creative writing.

Can creativity be learnt?

One of the main obstacles to teacher creativity is the myth that creativity is inherent in only a few select individuals. In interviews that I have

conducted with educators in five different countries, I have come across this myth on a number of occasions, especially in relation to why creative writing is sometimes discouraged in the classroom – or not practised by the very teachers who are expected to teach it. Chris Street and Kristin Stang make the point that the negative influence of this myth is compounded by the lack of confidence that some teachers experience with respect to positioning themselves as writers. As Will Gompertz affirms: *‘To give up before we even start, using low self-esteem or lack of qualifications as an excuse, is, frankly, gutless. As human beings we are all born with not only the wherewithal to be creative, but also the need.’* This implies that reconceptualising creativity and building confidence as writers are both pivotal for teachers of English.

Self-assurance and a positive writing identity might be crucial in order for teachers to be able to teach writing effectively. As Teresa Cremin and Lucy Oliver point out, these qualities can be developed by means of pre- and in-service training programmes, which can have an effect on teachers’ notions of ‘self’ as writer, confidence in writing and approaches to teaching writing. According to Terry Locke, David Whitehead, Stephanie Dix and Gail Cawkwell, the value of such training lies in the fact that those teachers *‘who assume the identity of “writer” and write alongside their students are likely to facilitate writing improvement in their students in terms of motivation and performance’*. I believe that it is of paramount importance that training gives as much, if not more, importance to the cultivation of writer identity as to the learning of pedagogical techniques. Furthermore, I would assert that ‘grit’ is one of the qualities that need to be developed as part of this focus on teachers’ identity as writers.

Grit

In her 2013 TED talk, Angela Lee Duckworth describes how when she started working as a public school teacher, she discovered that her students’ successful performance was not exclusively dependent on their intellectual talent: a significant role was played by grit. Later, she found that this was also true of military cadets, salespeople and novice teachers. In fact, one of her studies, reported in an article co-authored with Christopher Peterson, Michael Matthews and Dennis Kelly, indicates that *‘individual differences in grit accounted for significant incremental variance in success outcomes over and beyond that explained by IQ’*. She claims: *‘Grit is passion and perseverance for very long-term goals. Grit is having stamina. Grit is sticking with your future, day in, day out, not just for the week, not just for the month, but for years, and working really hard to make that future a reality. Grit is living life like it’s a marathon, not a sprint.’*

Her emphasis on stamina is important, especially since she sees it as necessary in order to overcome failure: *'Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress.'* When applied to almost any field of activity, grit can help to ensure success. That is probably why a lot of attention is currently being given to how it can be developed in children via formal and informal education. Similarly, teachers of English who wish to engage confidently in creative writing might find that grit is fundamental to their performance.

In fact, besides being typical of high-performing students, grit is a quality that successful creative individuals seem to possess. Will Gompertz suggests that one of the cardinal lessons that we can learn from artists is that they prevail despite the many failures they might experience. In fact, he maintains that *'when it comes to creativity, failure is as inevitable as it is unavoidable. It is part of the very fabric of making'*. He also claims that *'as long as you stick at what you are doing, constantly going through the cycle of experimentation, assessment and correction, the chances are you will reach the moment when everything falls into place'*. This seems to imply that, in spite of its limitations, grit might be a key quality for teachers of English wishing to position themselves as writers. If teacher writing and teacher education in writing contribute to enhanced writing instruction, as Jeri Watts maintains, then it is perhaps fundamental for teachers to develop the necessary grit for them to learn how to fail and yet not give up on their efforts to embrace the identity of 'writer'.

Teachers as writers

Teachers of English who wish to capitalise on the benefits that creative writing offers to their students need to see themselves as capable of producing creative texts. Their creativity as teachers can manifest itself in writing, but this is unlikely to happen if they conceive of creativity as something innate, or if they fear the act of writing creatively. Persisting at producing creative texts, even though they might not be immediately satisfied with their quality, is important, given that creative writing is something that can be learnt and developed if sufficient grit is applied to it.

When teachers model the role of a writer, they are bound to inspire their students to experiment with creative writing and to profit from it in terms of language learning. Even though some teachers might find it difficult to write in class together with their students, sharing their writing by means of classroom workshops might be a means of boosting the students' confidence to write and share their creative pieces. This entails creating an atmosphere of trust in class whereby the teacher and all the

students feel they can openly position themselves as writers of creative texts.

Even though time and other constraints might pose challenges to teachers who wish to engage in creative writing, it can be built into their classroom activities, just like any other form of writing. For this to happen, teachers need to understand the value of creative writing and might need to be provided with training in how to harness it for the purposes of language learning and teaching. This training would not just focus on the teachers' knowledge and skills as professionals wishing to cultivate their students' creativity, but it would also seek to increase their own confidence as writers, so that they are able to engage in creative writing in the classroom and beyond.



Training would help to develop their grit as teacher-writers by encouraging them to see creative writing as something that they are capable of doing. In this way, teachers would come to think of creative writing as an activity that it is worthwhile persisting with in their professional and personal lives. ■

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