CREATIVE WRITING IN CONTEXT OF UNIVERSITIES

Angelika Weirauch
Dr., FHD Fachhochschule Dresden (Germany)

Abstract

We present an old process developed more than a hundred years ago at American universities. It means professional, journalistic and academic forms of writing. It also includes poetry and narrative forms. Creative writing has always been at the heart of university education. Today, there are more than 500 bachelor's degree programs and 250 master's degree programs in this subject in the United States. In other fields of study, it is mandatory to enrol in this subject.

After World War II, it came to Europe, first to England and later to Germany. Here, "... since the 'Sturm und Drang' (1770-1789) of the early Goethe period, the autodidactic poetics of the cult of genius prevailed. The teachability of creative writing has been disputed ever since and its dissemination has therefore always had a hard time in Germany" [von Werder 2000:99]. It is rarely found in the curricula of German universities. At the Dresden University of Applied Sciences, we have been practicing it for five years with great response from social work students. They learn different methods: professional writing for partners and administration, poetic writing for children's or adult groups, scientific language for their final thesis and later publications.

Although we offer it as an elective, more than 80% of students choose it. Final papers are also written on these creative topics or using the methods learned. "Writing forces economy and precision. What swirls chaotically around in our heads at the same time has to be ordered into succession when writing" [Bütow in Tieger 2000:9].

The winners of this training are not only our former students! Children in after-school programs and youth clubs improve their writing skills through play. Patients in hospitals work on their biographies. People who only write on the computer discover slow and meaningful writing, activating their emotional system.

Therefore, this paper will show how clients benefit from creative writing skills of their social workers and what gain other disciplines can expect as well.

Keywords: *Methods and target groups of creative writing, experiences.*

1. Methods

For Creative Writing we use two groups of methods. One is the classical writing games, some of which are thousands of years old and help to think and organise thoughts in a literary way. The other are methods that do not belong to the classical canon of creative writing, but are important for future social workers. Basically these are:

1. individual or group writing with feedback, first of the group and second of the group leader on how the texts have been understood (reflection)
2. methods related to studies and university requirements (e.g. the Bachelor's thesis to be written) and methods for fun
3. methods related to the student's own person as well as to the future clientele
4. historical and modern writing tasks.

The tasks that do not belong to the classical canon of creative writing are:

1. learning the rules of "easy language" for people with learning disabilities or illnesses that make written communication difficult for them
2. dealing with official language
3. writing for websites, conceptions or preambles.

Examples of the methods mentioned are:

1. Writing can take place with individuals in the guidance of children in need, near illiterate adults and in therapeutic contexts. Writing groups take place in social group work with children or young people at school and in leisure groups. Writing can be done with adults and elderly at any time, e.g. as "literary socialising" [Mattenklott 1979]. Exercises for this are autogiographical writing using acrostics, snowballs, haikus, an ABC-darium, anagrams, group poems or poetry competitions [von Werder 2000:38]. Everything is possible, from the simplest letter game for writing beginners to complex texts.

   In the reflection, all texts created are read aloud and discussed sympathetically by the group. This triggers a strong self-reflection process in the writers. Immediately after writing, they experience - which is not granted to poets - how their texts are understood: Do the listeners really get what I wanted to tell them? Are my linguistic possibilities sufficient to present a fact? Is the relationship between self-presentation and factual content right?

2. Discs for study can, on the one hand, strive to liquefy language: thanks to the culture of short writing in the media, young people have become accustomed to only making lists instead of coherent texts. WhatsApp and shopping lists often lack coherence. Methods such as "automatic writing", making excerpts, rewriting the beginnings of texts and embedding quotations are possibilities.

   The counterpart, i.e. writing short texts that do not have a superficial meaning ("I only write when I have to do"), but train the writing itself, are e.g. limericks or lipograms (texts in which letters are omitted).

3. Writing on the topic of "illness and health" can be both for oneself and for the work with clients. Many different methods are possible, not only autobiographical ones. Culturally, illnesses and disabilities are taboo. Writing about them is breaking a taboo. In these texts, subsequent reflection is particularly important.

4. Historical writing tasks can cause a change of perspective in addition to the pleasure of writing. A different use of words and different weightings - slow poetic writing with the hand instead of everyday goal-oriented and factual writing play a role here. Figure poems, magical or concrete poetry are possible [Lodge 1993:166].

5. Nothing is more difficult than "easy language". It follows a set of rules like everyday language, but this is still little known in Germany. No sentence may have more than 5-7 words, commas, abbreviations, passive constructions and metaphors must be avoided. This language is often criticised by writers and journalists as impoverishment and adulteration, because it is highly simplified with a small vocabulary. Synonyms, that make our languages come alive are avoided. Nevertheless, this form of written language helps people with disabilities to understand contexts or laws.

6. For about twenty-five years, people in the social field have been trying to adapt the historically evolved language to the requirements of modern times. The point is that women and men are mentioned, that people with disabilities, people of other religions or other preferences of living together are not spoken of in derogatory vocabulary [Pusch 1999:14]. A correct expression that does not come across as silly, awkward or official is often not easy to find [Müller; Fuchs 1993:21]. This, too, can become a task for creative writing. There are no ready-made exercises for this in German yet.

7. The language of the German authorities has become easier in recent years, but still poses a challenge for many sections of the population. Future social pedagogues need to know this language in order to be able to help their clients. If we encourage people from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds to study, the more necessary it is to introduce them to the official language and to make it people-, women- and career-friendly [Müller; Fuchs 1993:146].

8. Development reports for children and young people, association statutes, preambles and conceptions – according to the current needs of the group – are developed with the students. Often new projects are started in social projects with the recruitment of new staff and advertised on websites. Social work rarely has helpers in public relations – this has to be done by the employees themselves.

References

Bütow, T. (2000). "*The new writing scene*" in Tieger, Gerhild (Hg.) "*Learning creative writing at universities, institutes, literature offices, adult education centres and writing schools in Germany, Austria and Switzerland*". Berlin, Germany: Autorenhaus-Publisher Plinke.

Lodge, D. (1998). "*The Art of Fiction*". Munich, Germany: Heyne TB Publishers.

Mattenklott, G. (1979). "*Literary Sociability – Writing in School. With texts by young people and suggestions for the classroom*". Stuttgart, Germany: Metzler-Publishers.

Müller, S., Fuchs, C. (1993). "Handbook on non-sexist language use in public texts". Frankfurt/M., Germany: Fischer-Publishers.

Pusch, L. F. (1999). "*The woman is not worth talking about*". Frankfurt/M., Germany Suhrkamp- Publishers.

Von Werder, L. (2000). "*Introduction to Creative Writing*". Milow, Germany: Schibri-Publishers.