

# **SOUTH AFRICAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND THE TEACHING OF CREATIVE WRITING IN DIVERSE CONTEXTS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The training of creative writers in South Africa requires a programme that is able to address the country's complex cultural and linguistic composition. There is an increasing awareness of the importance of cultural and language identity and the need for a variety of children's literature in all languages. Although there are many talented storytellers in South Africa, there is still a need for new writers who can meet this demand. In this article the basic principles of teaching creative writing are set within the context of teaching creative writing for children, which can serve as a basis for tuition in diverse training contexts. The approach integrates identified principles derived from different theoretical paradigms on thoughts of literacy, creativity, creative writing and literary theory, combined with years of practical experience. Core principles identified are the consideration of the context, the primary means of cultural transference in a community, the complex dynamics of the creative process, the articulation of relevant content and the application of the principles in specific teaching and learning environments. These principles inform the general approach to the courses, the structuring thereof, and the selection of appropriate content. The approach is illustrated with reference to various courses and activities and South African children's literature.

## **KEYWORDS**

Creative writing, teaching, children's literature, creativity in context, storytelling, creative writing courses, creative writing theory

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

South Africa is a socially diverse country, with a wide range of cultures and 11 official languages. This diversity is also reflected in children's literature in the various

languages which, due to several historical, cultural, ideological and economic factors, displays an array of unique characteristics. Afrikaans and English children's literatures have the strongest literary tradition. In order to provide literature in a new language which originated on the southernmost tip of Africa, Afrikaans children's literature developed earlier and faster than indigenous English children's literature, which had to a greater extent been influenced by the international availability of English books (Van der Walt 2005:14). Children's literature in African languages is still at an early stage of development (Van der Walt 2005:14); relatively few children's books have been written by black authors, and children's books in the black South African languages are often translated works of white authors; a significant proportion are versions of indigenous folktales (Jenkins 2006: xi); and the literature is principally associated with the educational market. There is, however, an increasing awareness of the importance of language identity and the need for a variety of children's literature in all languages. This also implies a need for writers who can meet this demand.

As a creative writing instructor, I am involved in a range of training contexts for creative writing for children, ranging from formal university courses to *ad hoc* workshops addressing specific needs. The following request for such a workshop illustrates the awareness of the need for children's literature in the different languages, as well as the complexity of this specific training context:

The need exists for sufficient readers for children in the indigenous languages. Past workshops had shown that, although the authors have a natural talent for storytelling, they are lacking the necessary aptitude on the child as reader. The request is to present a one-day workshop concentrating on writing fiction for children in the foundation phase (pre-school up to grade 3; age 4 to 9 years). The workshop will form part of an *Indigenous Languages Book Fair* and will be sponsored by an educational publisher. A competition will be launched at the workshop with prizes for best entries in the different languages and publishing possibilities for suitable manuscripts. Since the workshop will be attended by participants from different language groups, (Sepedi, Xitsonga, Tshivenda, Ndebele, Afrikaans and English), the presentation must be in English. (Summary of the letter of request, Lotz 2006)

Courses in creative writing are offered at several South African universities mainly on postgraduate level. At graduate level teaching of creative writing usually consists of separate modules as part of degree studies in language and literature or of teacher training courses. These courses in creative writing usually comprise the genres of prose and poetry. The Potchefstroom campus of North-West University also offers the writing of children's literature as one of the available modules. Specialisation in children's literature at post-graduate level is also possible. However, study at a residential university is a luxury few prospective writers can afford. Prospective writers thus depend on other training possibilities, such as self-study, correspondence courses, mentorship and *ad hoc* training opportunities in the form of short courses and workshops.

The need for alternative training possibilities is addressed, *inter alia*, at the North-West University's School for Creative Writing. The latter is sponsored by the ATKV (an Afrikaans language and culture society). The ATKV-Skryfskool, as it is known, has been in existence for 22 years and is closely aligned with the subject group Creative Writing at the university. The School offers non-formal creative writing courses to the general public. These courses, which are presented countrywide, include courses for adult writers as well as school children, and provide tuition in a variety of genres, including children's literature. Apart from fixed courses as a part of the School's annual programme, courses are also presented on request and in co-operation with other organisations. These courses vary from specialised and intensive weeklong events to day-long workshops or introductory work-sessions of a few hours.

Tuition at the Potchefstroom Campus of North-West University and the ATKV-Skryfskool is primarily in Afrikaans, which is the first language of most of the students and participants. However, the university's demographics are changing with the enrolment of more students from other language and cultural groups. In the Creative Writing courses, students are free to write their assignments and creative work in either Afrikaans or English.<sup>1</sup>

As is the case with creative writing classes in general, in any given group there is a wide range of aptitudes, skills, motivations and commitments (Wandor 2003:13). Although it would be assumed that the participants' reading background in a homogeneous language group would be similar, it is not necessarily the case, as the reading experience of different generations and individuals may differ notably. The tuition situation is even more complex when a course is presented for a diverse audience with respect to language and culture.

The ideal would be for tuition for writers to take place in their mother tongue. However, this is not possible when courses for heterogeneous groups, as was the case in the quoted request, are presented. In this event a shared language must be used as the language of communication, and this language, usually English, is often neither the presenter's nor the participants' first language. The facilitator and participants do not necessarily know each other's languages, and subsequently, they may not know what children's literature is available in the applicable languages. The participants' reading backgrounds may also differ vastly, especially in literature in an own (indigenous) language such as Ndebele or Setswana.

As has been described, in a complex environment, much is demanded of the compiler and facilitator of creative writing courses. A particular facilitator may be expected to conduct courses ranging from university modules to short introductory workshops, involving participants with diverse backgrounds, training, language, culture and literary traditions. Classes may range from relatively homogeneous to heterogeneous groups.

The question arises whether it is possible to identify universal principles for the teaching of creative writing that may serve as a base for tuition in diverse training contexts.

My extensive involvement in teaching and creative writing (inter alia, as a teacher and lecturer for 30 years, writer of children's literature, creative writing instructor, facilitator of community-based creative writing projects, webmaster of a website for children's literature, and researcher) informed and contributed to my approach to the teaching of writing for young readers. This article discusses this approach, which integrates identified principles derived from different theoretical paradigms on thoughts of literacy, creativity, creative writing and literary theory, combined with my years of practical experience.

The approach is based on core principles for the teaching of creative writing, namely the consideration of context; means of cultural transference; the complex dynamics of creativity and of the creative process; and the articulation of content inherent and relevant to the theory and practice of the domain. These core principles inform my general approach, the structuring of courses and the selection of content, and they are applied in specific teaching and learning environments according to sound didactic principles.

## 2 CORE PRINCIPLES

### 2.1 CONTEXT

The observance of context, whether in the wider (e.g. historical, socio-cultural, political, ideological) or narrower (e.g. specific or personal situation) sense of the word, is intrinsic to the appreciation of the specific approach. Narrations always take place within a certain context and are construed for a specific audience, which influences the narrative form and content in different ways. The importance of the context for creativity and the understanding thereof are stressed by Todd Lubart (1999:339) when he states: "Creativity does not occur in a vacuum. When we examine a creative person, product, or process, we often ignore the environmental milieu. We decontextualize creativity. The environment, however, is always present and can have a profound effect on creative expression. The environment may be involved in stimulating and supporting creativity as well as defining and evaluating it." In this instance, namely the teaching of creative writing for children, the environment entails aspects such as the disposition, status and role of children's literature (and the author of children's literature) in a particular country or culture, which determines, inter alia, publication possibilities and the reception of texts. Strategies for the teaching of creative writing must take into consideration the narrative traditions, circumstances and needs of the particular society and participants, without becoming paralysed by the apparent incongruence of these demands.

In her book, *Children's literature comes of age: toward a new aesthetic*, Maria Nikolajeva (1996:95) holds the view that the historic development of children's literature in different countries and language areas has gone through similar stages, namely: (1) adapting existing adult literature and folklore to what is believed to be the needs and

interests of children, according to accepted and dominant views of child upbringing; (2) writing didactic stories directly for children; (3) establishing children's literature as a literary system with its different genres and modes; and (4) developing polyphonic, or multi-voiced, children's literature. According to Nikolajeva, these phases are quite relative, they can overlap, and phenomena from earlier stages may occur in later ones. Countries where children's literature emerged late tend to skip the second period, since they can draw on experience from other countries (Nikolajeva 1996:96). However, Emer O'Sullivan (2004:16) argues that this model is based on a European model of literary history and does not make provision for the various functions of the literature and its "rich and necessary diversity". Although the distinction of and division between various phases can imply a normative and evaluative approach, both Nikolajeva's model and O'Sullivan's viewpoint illustrate the strong ties existing between text and context. In a diverse community such as South Africa divergent narrative and literary traditions exist and children's literature in the various languages is in different phases of development. The diversity and traditions, and the historical development, tendencies and needs of the particular community or individuals should be considered in the establishment, design and presentation of a course in creative writing. There should also be an awareness of the tension that exists between the call for a "South African" identity and the more local call for identity of a particular culture within a larger political and economic space. The need for an overarching South African identity is especially apparent during the development of children's literature for use in schools.

## **2.2 PRIMARY MEANS OF CULTURAL TRANSFERENCE IN A COMMUNITY**

Régis Debray (Stassen 2007) identifies three media spheres, namely: the *logo sphere*; the *grapho sphere*; and the *video sphere*. The most important feature of each sphere is that cultural transmittance mainly occurs through the spoken word (logo sphere), the written word (grapho sphere) and/or the image (video sphere). The media sphere also relates to the historical development of communication. The distinction made by Debray corresponds broadly with the way Walter Ong (1982:15) distinguishes between primary orality, literacy (chirographic and orthographic culture) and secondary orality. While some communities may have a predominantly oral culture in many ways, they are to a smaller or larger extent influenced by contact with secondary orality (Ong 1982:14). Secondary orality entails electronic technology such as radio and television, is literate to varying degrees and is, according to Ong (1982:18–19), dependent on writing. The distinction between the logo, grapho and video spheres – or, for that matter, between primary orality, literacy and secondary orality – is relatively fluid. Electronic and digital technology (part of the video sphere) and especially the exponential growth of the Internet and web applications, have contributed to the accelerated development of visual communication. This phenomenon is radically changing modern civilisation, including the way people think (Carr 2010:10).

In South Africa and other multi-cultural communities, rather complicated relationships exist between the different modes of transfer (Brown 1999:9). Although a “pure” oral culture within a particular cultural community is a rarity today, orality is still, according to Abiola Irele (2001:11), the dominant mode of communication in Africa. In South Africa, orality and literacy interface in a variety of ways and a large domain of cultural forms that cross the boundaries between written and oral exists (Richard & Veit-Wild 2005:xii). In this regard, Ruth Finnegan (2005:169) refers to the multidimensionality of literature, which implies that written and oral forms can overlap and intermingle. Written texts can display several characteristics normally associated with orality, such as the narrative structure or acoustic elements, for example rhythm, rhyme and emphasis. The possibilities offered by digital technology and the influence of such technology on new forms of multimodal texts (such as written/visual texts combined with moving sections, sound and interactivity) contribute to the multidimensionality of literature. The ready availability of electronic media, such as cellphones, the Internet and iPads, inevitably impacts on narrative, writing and reading options.

The constant telling and re-telling of stories could be considered a narrative chain. This chain entails the participation of diverse individuals, each interpreting, mediating and re-mediating a text. In South Africa, this narrative chain could range from primary orality and literacy to secondary orality and involves various individuals, ranging from a performer (oral narrative), author, scribe, translator, illustrator and editor to a webmaster or videographer. It is also possible for individuals living in a particular community to “live” in three different media spheres – for example, a grandmother primarily functioning in the logo sphere (primary orality), her literate son reading and writing as part of the grapho sphere (literacy), and a granddaughter through her exposure to digital technology (TV, radio, cell phones, etc.) actually functioning in the video sphere (secondary orality). Identity, especially narrative identity, forms part of this narrative chain. The means of cultural transference and the stories told in a community influence the individual’s identity which is inevitably reflected in the form and content of his or her own narration (Greyling & Combrink 2008:252).

An awareness of participants’ cultural background, various storytelling traditions, the functioning of the narrative chain, the inherence of narrative identity, and the multidimensionality of literature is important when structuring a course, selecting relevant content, planning activities and appreciating creative work.

## **2.3 CREATIVITY AND THE CREATIVE PROCESS**

Since creative writing is a form of creative expression, the inherence of the creative process is obvious. Teresa Amabile’s (1996:127) componential (contextual) model of creativity offers a valuable basis for the comprehension of the creative process as such, as well as for the particular approach discussed here.

In her model, Amabile identifies several cognitive factors as well as motivational and social aspects which could influence the creative process. Three components of creative performance are distinguished in the model, namely:

- **Domain-relevant skills (expertise):** include factual knowledge about the domain, the technical skills required and special domain-relevant talent. These skills depend on innate cognitive abilities, innate perceptual and motor skills and formal and informal education.
- **Creativity-relevant processes (thinking skills):** include appropriate cognitive style, implicit or explicit knowledge of heuristics for generating novel ideas and a conducive work style, and depend on training, experience in idea generation and personality characteristics.
- **Task motivation:** includes attitudes toward the task and perceptions of own motivation for undertaking the task. It depends on an initial level of intrinsic motivation toward the task, the presence or absence of salient extrinsic constraints, and an individual's ability to cognitively minimise extrinsic constraints (Amabile 1996:84).

The influence of the social environment on creativity forms an important part of Amabile's model. The theory proposes that the social environment has a primary influence on creativity by influencing task motivation (Amabile 1996:115). A higher level of motivation may lead to additional learning about the task and related subjects, thereby increasing domain-relevant skills. High task motivation can also lead to learning in creativity-relevant skills (Amabile 1996:98). In Amabile's model, the above-mentioned components of creative performance are linked to the creative process in which five steps are distinguished, namely problem or task identification, preparation, response generation, response validation and communication, and the outcome (1996:114). These steps are also applicable to the creative writing process, where it can be simplified to the stimulus phase, preparation and planning, writing a draft, revision (including rewriting and macro and micro revision), and publication.

Amabile's model provides a framework for the constitution of the structuring, content and presentation of a course in creative writing. The importance of domain-relevant skills, creativity-relevant processes and motivation for creative writing are apparent. According to the model, some skills are innate, while other skills depend on formal and informal education. Tuition in creative writing can concentrate on the latter. It would also be ideal to provide a learning environment optimal to intrinsic motivation, and which could provide the opportunity for the mastering of domain-relevant skills and creativity-relevant processes as well. This implies a social environment and atmosphere and a variety of activities conducive to the creative process. In a multicultural community it is also important to be aware of diverse notions of creativity, and of cultural or social

factors which might influence individuals' participation and creative processes. (See also 2.4.)

## **2.4 CONTENT AND THE LITERARY COMMUNICATION MODEL**

When the content of a course is established, existing practice and literature could give an indication of what knowledge, skills and processes are considered to be important. Despite similar content in creative writing courses and manuals it is clear that diverse approaches and points of departure exist, ranging from a focus on the child and reader, the writer and the art of writing, to the genre and the market. Writers and illustrators of children's books also tend to emphasise different aspects of the writers' approach, equipment and writing process. Literary theory and reader response criticism illustrate the importance of ideological aspects such as the view of the child and the purpose of literature. It is evident that the assumed reader enjoys much more prominence in discourses on children's literature than in literary theory in general.

In order to structure the identified content, Roman Jakobson's communication model as applied to the literary communication situation, which depicts the relationship between the author, reader, text and context, can be used. Aspects regarding the *author* could include the creative process, thinking skills – including important principles for the writing of children's books such as attempting to place oneself in the child's shoes – and the writing process. Aspects relating to the *text* could include an overview of children's books and genres, narrative elements, technical requirements and revision. Aspects concerning the *reader* could include attributes of the child, the child as reader, and the needs and expectations of publishers and adult mediators.

The communication model can also serve as a point of reference for the structuring of workshops and the orientation of the participants. Explaining to the participants the various aspects which will be dealt with, and their mutual relationship, will help to contextualise and demystify the content. Reference to the communication model is also a convenient and concrete way to explain the publishing process.

## **3 THE APPLICATION OF THE APPROACH AND PRINCIPLES IN A SPECIFIC TEACHING AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

The implementation of any given course should also consider the context of the particular learning and teaching environment, the knowledge and skills of the participants, and the desired outcomes. Provision should be made for the acquisition of theoretical and practical knowledge and the practice and mastering of skills, while also advancing task

motivation. Since the active involvement of the individual in the process of learning is a sound didactic principle – even more so in practice-based disciplines such as creative writing – the ideal would be to acquire knowledge and skills through the combination of theory and practice. This combination can entail different levels, for example: the combination of theory and practice in the constitution of a curriculum, and in the structuring of a module or particular course; the exposure of prospective writers to the practice of writing and the publishing industry through contact with established writers and publishers; the combination of theoretical and practical aspects in the same session (e.g. the application of discussed theoretical principles in a short creative writing exercise); and the combination of theoretical and practical aspects in a single activity.

The implementation of theoretical principles is illustrated with reference to three diverse courses and some activities. The courses entail a graduate module at the university, a short course and a workshop fit for a particular purpose.

### **3.1 GRADUATE MODULE FOR THE WRITING OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE**

The module for the writing of children's literature at the Potchefstroom campus of North-West University is presented as a semester module in the second year. By that time the enrolled students have already followed an introductory first-year course in creative writing as well as courses in the writing of prose and/or poetry. They have already acquired domain-relevant skills and creativity-relevant processes on which this particular course can build. It is expected of students at this level to be able to work independently, to combine theory and practice, and to be able to critically evaluate their own creative writing.

Although these students may have ample theoretical knowledge, they do not necessarily have insight into the nature of the child and the target reader, and their reading experience is often limited to books they have read as children. The students are guided, with the aid of various activities and assignments, to get to know and understand the genre, the target reader and the context. These activities and assignments include, inter alia, re-imagining their childhood; writing a reading report of books they read as a child; conducting an elementary reading investigation; visiting local schools, libraries and bookshops; and doing self-study and research. The university has a well-equipped library which also includes a children's literature collection, and students are expected to read on a variety of topics, such as the psychological development of children, children's reading skills and needs, as well as children's literature from different traditions and genres. The reading list includes classics and contemporary children's literature, as well as an extended list of local children's books. These acquired insights are presented in seminar classes, form part of theoretical assignments and result in the students' own creative writing.

Creative application entails the writing of various texts for diverse age groups in an assortment of genres and text types, including an acquaintance with new media and advanced narrative techniques. Creative assignments could include rewriting a folk tale; writing an adventure story for specific target readers; writing a short story for teenagers; developing a picture book; completing a project for new media; etc. The students' creative writing is discussed in workshops, after which further revision follows.

The narrative tradition is incorporated in the curriculum in diverse ways, for example an assignment on the rewriting of a folk tale which involves independent research combined with creative writing. In this particular theme, the students are introduced to local narrative traditions, such as the Ngano stories from Venda, or through video and sound recordings of local storytellers relaying their own versions of well-known South African and European stories, such as *Jakkals en Wolf* (*Jackal and Wolf*) and *Die koning en die ganse* (*The king and the geese*). In due course students discover texts ranging from the original or older versions to post-modern rewritings, for example different versions of classic fairy tales narrated by Charles Perrault and the Grimm brothers, as well as variations of African folktales, such as those found in a collection of Nelson Mandela's favourite stories, *Madiba's magic*. The exposure to various narrative traditions makes students aware of the diversity and numerous possibilities for writers, of shared stories and themes in diverse cultures, and of ways in which stories have been adapted in different contexts. An example of the rewriting of *Little Red Riding Hood* in a rural African context is *Makwelane and the crocodile* (text by Maria Hendriks and illustrated by Piet Grobler) which narrates the story of Makwelane outwitting the sly crocodile and rescuing her *gogo* (grandmother) from the beast. Post-modern approaches in books, such as *The stinky cheese man and other fairly stupid tales* (Jon Scieska and Lane Smith) and Martie Preller's *Anderkantland* (literally "the land on the other side"), in which the authors use metafictional play and bricolage strategies to combine various fairy tales (Beckett 2002:288), especially delight students used to more traditional forms. The diversity and diverse approaches found in the various texts usually stimulate their own creative endeavours.

### 3.2 SHORT COURSES

Intensive short courses of between three and five days in length are presented either as part of the fixed annual programme of the ATKV-Skryfskool or by special request, for example in co-operation with publishers, and provide the opportunity for participants to become acquainted with children's literature. The participants may vary from established writers who are exploring new genres, and prospective writers who have unsuccessfully submitted manuscripts to publishers, to individuals who are pursuing a new hobby. A proven effective format for a short course is to structure it according to the writing process. Consequently, the participants' knowledge and skills are built up systematically, which, towards the end of the course, enables them to comment candidly

on their own and other participants' creative work and also to comprehend commentary or critique on their own work.

A course such as the one mentioned above starts with an overview of the writing process, after which each phase is demonstrated and the participants systematically write their own stories. The phases of the creative writing process correspond with Amabile's steps of the creative process. During the first, or *stimulation* phase (problem and task identification), a variety of activities are used to explain and demonstrate creativity-relevant processes. Experience has shown that vocational writers especially benefit from the exposure to creative techniques and experience in idea generation. Through activities that make use of the participants' participation and knowledge of the applicable theory on the child, the reader and the genre can already be shared in this phase and story ideas generated. (Examples of these activities are discussed later in 3.3.)

The second phase entails *planning* (preparing) the piece of writing. By being exposed to a variety of children's literature, which may be discovered, discussed and compared throughout the course, the participants become acquainted with the latest publications and the basic attributes of a story. These books also serve as shared reference material for the particular teaching and learning environment, and as such bridge the gap in reading experience between the facilitator and diverse participants. Basic information on the narrative elements, such as the characters, setting, plot and narrator, is discussed and the principles regarding the selection, planning and establishing thereof in the text are explained. Picture books prove to be especially valuable to explain narrative principles. The use of illustrations helps the participants to understand abstract concepts more easily and to apply them in their writing. *Jamela's dress* (1999) by Niki Daly and *Wat doen jy, Daniël?* (2001) [*What are you doing, Daniel?*] written by Leon de Villiers and illustrated by Annelie van der Vyver, can serve as examples of this approach.

Daly's Jamela stories (e.g. *Jamela's dress*) provide a wealth of possibilities for illustrating narrative principles. In these books, Daly (writer and illustrator) depicts everyday incidents in the life of Jamela, which, due to the girl's lively personality, tend to develop into adventures. The realistic illustrations portraying people, events and settings of a typical township, can be used to illustrate the importance for the author to create the world of the story, including a convincing setting, diverse and recognisable characters, an interesting plot, and characters and situations with which young readers can identify.

*Wat doen jy, Daniël?* is excellent for explaining certain concepts, such as the child's view, narrator and point of view (focalisation). Daniël is making a nuisance of himself by lying on his back in different rooms in the house. Everybody comments on his weird behaviour, except his grandfather who wants to know what he is doing. After Daniël answers that he is discovering how things look from below, his grandfather joins him on the floor. As a result the same rooms and people as before are depicted, but this time from a different view – that of the child and his grandfather. This changed perspective

yields delightful surprises in the detailed illustrations, such as bank notes tucked under a mattress and fantasy elements suggesting the child's imaginative view.

After an introduction to the narrative elements and basic principles of writing for children, participants in the course develop their own ideas which originated during the first phase, and plan their own stories. This is followed by the *writing* (response generation) of a creative text – thus combining creativity-relevant processes and domain-relevant skills. The actual writing usually takes place after hours. The next phase, namely *revision* (response validating and communication), entails the specific application of domain-relevant knowledge in order to hone the manuscript for the target reader. Aspects such as the use of language, dialogue, humour and identification may be discussed and demonstrated, enabling writers to apply the principles as part of the macro and micro revision of their texts.

In the *publishing* phase (outcomes), the participants have the opportunity to read their manuscripts to each other for feedback from group members and facilitators. Through the systematic presentation of the course the participants learn to understand the creative process, the publication process, as well as the particular genre and writing for the applicable readers. Courses such as these are enriched by the participation of established writers and publishers in the programme.

### 3.3 SHORT WORKSHOPS

Day courses and shorter workshops are usually presented on request, in which case the content is determined by the needs of the specific organiser or principal. The request in the introduction is an example of such a brief. This clear brief implies a particular focus, and the content and activities are planned accordingly. In this particular situation the specific context was taken into consideration and the facilitators concentrated on texts suitable for this particular target reader.

The available time in any course, especially in a short course or workshop, should be used as efficiently and effectively as possible. A well-planned activity can convey facts, demonstrate a creative principle, provide the opportunity for an individual to experience the heuristics of creativity, and contribute to intrinsic motivation. The following activities, which serve as an example, have proved to be successful in diverse contexts.

- **Activity 1 – Playing with clay (become a child again):** Each person receives a few pieces of modelling clay with the invitation to “play”. The unexpectedness of an activity such as this can serve as an introductory exercise; contribute to a relaxing atmosphere; elicit spontaneous conversations; stimulate associations with participants' own childhood; etc. In a short feedback session after such an activity the facilitator may point out important principles, for example the author's ability to place himself/herself in a child's shoes, process sensory perception and use play for creativity. Individuals who experience the situation

first hand, would probably nod in agreement and be willing to participate in the next activity.

- **Activity 2 – Counting-out rhyme/lullaby:** In diverse cultural and language groups in which a shared language is used as medium of instruction, it is important to put everyone at ease and to acknowledge language diversity. An activity that invariably promises success is to use a counting-out rhyme or lullaby as an example and to encourage participants to think of similar rhymes or songs from their own childhood and to share them with each other. This activity usually leads to people spontaneously reciting or singing the rhymes or songs to each other, as well as unearthing shared reminiscences, for example *Homolela ngwanaka*, a Pedi traditional song which starts like this: “*Homolela ngwanaka/antutulele ngwanaka-shhh . . . pmp . . . pmp . . . ngwanaka/homolela ngwanaka/antutulele, o a kwa?*” (“Be quiet my baby/sleep my baby, shhh . . . pmp . . . pmp . . . my baby/ be quiet my baby/ sleep, do you hear?”). The shared pleasure of words, sounds and rhythm without necessarily understanding the meaning of the language, can also be used to emphasise the importance of these elements in texts for children. This activity arouses many associations and enables the participants to relive their own childhood and to imagine themselves as children. Similar activities can also be used to illustrate the importance for all language and culture groups to tell their own stories.
- **Activity 3 – The world of the child: drawing childhood homes:** A particularly effective exercise entails drawing the home and surroundings where a person grew up. The participant can, for example draw the floor plan of the house and add details inside and outside of the home. By using activities associated with the right hemisphere of the brain (Sawyer 2006:80), childhood memories, including sensory and emotional experiences, are stimulated. Sometimes participants vividly recall details of their childhood environment and experiences, and of people and relationships presumably forgotten. The exercise can be extended by drawing the larger environment including important manmade and natural landmarks, such as roads, buildings, rivers and mountains. By combining this exercise with some free writing, participants often experience creative flow (Sawyer 2006:53) with much to write about. Similar activities include depicting the games participants played as children and visualising the bedroom or private space they lived in as teenagers. These exercises also serve to make participants aware of individual experience as well as the universal experiences and needs of children.
- **Activity 4 – Imagining what the world of a child looks like:** Adult writers often tend to rely on memories of their own childhood and the books they have read, and these become the norm for their writings. Writers also tend to generalise their own social and physical environments as if all children and readers share the same circumstances. In the process the world of the contemporary child

is often either ignored or insufficiently recognised, and the existing diversity inadequately portrayed. An activity that works particularly well in groups is to split a large group into six smaller groups or pairs. Give each group a piece of poster size paper, some newspapers, and pairs of scissors, glue and markers, with the instruction to make a collage illustrating one of the following themes: children's families, neighbourhoods, schools, technology, country and world. Through participating in the activity the participants share their observations, experiences and opinions with each other. Seeing that the focus is on the completion of the assignment, the group members tend to participate spontaneously, which may also contribute to building their self-confidence and a willingness to share their ideas with the larger group.

The next step involves the groups explaining their posters to the larger group, and as such, providing an overview of the world the contemporary child lives in, the diverse contexts children find themselves in, as well as the systematic extension of the world and experiences of the child. In an activity such as this, the aim is neither the comprehensiveness nor the correctness of the facts, but the establishment of general principles and of the need for the writer to be aware of the world of the child, as well as the fact that the writer himself/herself may acquire this knowledge through observation and reading. This activity also proves to be of great value for the facilitator to get to know the group members and their particular circumstances and concerns. In the particular day course mentioned earlier, the participants' great concern for the quality of education and especially the differences between rural and city schools became apparent.

- **Activity 5 – Getting to know what children's books look like (know the genre):** It is important for prospective writers to have a thorough overview of genres and reading needs, publishing tendencies, and available publications, including Euro-centric, African-centric classic works as well as contemporary publications. As has been mentioned before, the reading experience of individuals may differ substantially. An effective way to deal with this situation is to use picture books for purposes such as explaining the diverse reading and publication needs, demonstrating the use of narrative elements, and using them as a common denominator in heterogeneous groups.

Picture books that have been translated into different languages can serve as examples in groups consisting of participants from diverse cultural backgrounds. In this case the information and explanation thereof can be in the medium of instruction, while individuals can read the texts in their own languages. This activity usually leads to participants identifying gaps in their own knowledge, or the lack of picture books in various languages. *Zanzibar Road* (2006) (written and illustrated by Niki Daly) is available in all 11 official languages. The book uses anthropomorphised animal characters to depict settings and situations

characteristic of many communities in Africa, while it also incorporates themes universal to all people and children, such as the need to belong, the importance of caring for one another and being part of a community, thus making it a book relevant to all cultures and languages. The humour depicted in the words, the illustrations and the interplay between words and illustrations provide further possibilities for discussion.

A variety of picture books in different languages could also be used with participants working individually, in pairs or in small groups. The participants can, for example, try to deduce the story from the illustrations; translate the words for each other; and discuss the content and themes, the connection between words and illustrations, and the approach of the authors. As discussed, narrative elements, such as character, plot and setting, can be discussed efficiently with the aid of the illustrations. Physical attributes of books, such as the cover, title page and number of pages, can be demonstrated and explained, and the role or responsibility of the author, illustrator and publisher can be discussed to provide a condensed overview of the publication process.

## 4 CONCLUSION

Courses and workshops can at best create an awareness of the art of writing for children. The challenge in developing and presenting such courses is to convey the essence of creative writing for children, and to make prospective writers aware of the most important domain-specific knowledge and skills and creativity-relevant processes needed, as well as the importance of being adequately motivated to obtain this knowledge and to master the appropriate skills.

The same principle applies throughout – whether for an extended graduate module or an hour-long work session – namely, that the individual must be made aware of particular aspects, yet personally accept the responsibility to obtain the details and to master the appropriate skills. In order to achieve success, writers have to write and it is largely a time-consuming and solitary act. Although the process and result thereof primarily depend on internal motivation, the facilitator can, through the creation of a pleasant learning environment, most probably have a positive influence on the motivation and participation of prospective writers. By introducing the participants to a variety of publications they become aware of the wealth of creative possibilities, of the importance for a writer to first and foremost be a reader, and of the particular publication needs for which they might be able to provide.

The approach and various courses discussed in the article have yielded success, and appreciation is usually expressed for the creative and practical presentation of the courses; for the opportunity to acquire new skills; and for the introduction to a wider view of children's books. For some participants, acquiring knowledge and skills has

led to insight and the urge to share their newly gained knowledge with others, as the following testimonial illustrates: “Kindly pass my greetings and thanks to the presenter. I was blind, but now I can see. I feel great because I can teach.” The courses have also yielded success through publications by talented and dedicated writers, who were invited to return as guest speakers at subsequent courses (e.g., Christien Nesor and Nelia Engelbrecht).

In an editorial in *New Writing*, Graeme Harper (2006:3) states that creative writing involves some kind of critical engagement with the world. He also emphasises the need for the exploration and articulation of the tools, skills, principles and theories/models of creative writing. This article has illustrated how core principles for the teaching of creative writing are identified, applied to the writing of children’s literature and adapted according to the particular circumstances. As such the article has also paid heed to Harper’s request for the articulation of the principles and theories of creative writing.

By departing from basic principles, establishing the essence of children’s literature and making use of sound didactic principles and a wide selection of international and local children’s literature as examples, diverse target groups can be accommodated and available teaching and learning opportunities optimally used. Such an approach demands from the facilitator an awareness of the means of cultural transmittance; a thorough knowledge of the dynamics of creativity and the theory and practice of creative writing; an awareness and a thorough knowledge of available publications; a pliable approach; and the ability to improvise within a particular context.

## NOTE

- 1 The medium of instruction at North-West University used to be Afrikaans. As a result of various factors, such as the amalgamation of two independent universities (Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education and the University of the North-West) the official languages of the university are now Afrikaans, English and Setswana. The latter is the most widely used language in the province, but does not serve as medium of instruction at tertiary level. The primary medium of instruction at the various campuses reflects the composition of the students attending the different campuses – Potchefstroom; Afrikaans, Mafikeng; English, Vanderbijlpark; Afrikaans and English. It would certainly be ideal if all three languages could be used as medium of instruction in the creative writing modules, but unfortunately various obstacles make this ideal unattainable. Some universities do make provision for the indigenous languages. Rhodes University offers a Masters programme in creative writing where the classes are conducted in English, while students are allowed to submit their work in English, Afrikaans or Xhosa. Multilingualism in education, the support offered by the state and the funding of language diversity are complex issues and discussion thereof does not fall within the ambit of this article.

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