



From Observation to Imagination: Teaching World-Building Through Story, Attention, and Critical Inquiry

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Abstract— *Creative writing pedagogy has often privileged imagination as the defining characteristic of storytelling. Yet many young writers struggle not because they lack imagination, but because they believe they have nothing worth writing about. This paper proposes a pedagogical model that repositions observation, critical thinking, empathy, and structured inquiry as the true foundations of world-building. Drawing on a story-building workshop designed for middle-school students, and grounding its design in narrative psychology, structuralist and post-structuralist narrative theory, cognitive research on attention and creativity, and sociocultural learning theory, it argues that effective storytelling begins with learning to notice the world before attempting to invent new ones. The workshop integrates literary theory, cognitive observation, narrative analysis, collaborative exercises, and current discussions on artificial intelligence to demonstrate that stories emerge from attentive engagement with reality rather than unrestricted fantasy. Rather than teaching creative writing as a collection of technical skills, this approach frames telling stories as a human act of meaning-making, ethical reflection, and imaginative reconstruction, and it proposes a theoretically informed alternative to imagination-first models of creative writing instruction.*



Keywords— *attention, creative writing pedagogy, narrative theory, storytelling, world-building.*

I. INTRODUCTION

For centuries, storytelling has occupied a central place in human civilisation. Long before written literature, stories transmitted history, values, identity, and cultural memory. Despite this lasting importance, creative writing instruction frequently begins with a problematic assumption — that students must first possess exceptional imagination to become storytellers.

This assumption often alienates novice writers. Young learners commonly believe that only extraordinary experiences produce meaningful stories and that successful authors possess unusual lives or exceptional creative abilities. Such beliefs create unnecessary barriers to writing, and they are difficult to dislodge through technique alone, since they concern a learner's sense of who is permitted to be an author rather than their command of craft.

This paper argues for an alternative pedagogical approach. Instead of treating imagination as the starting point of

storytelling, it proposes that observation should precede invention. The writer's first responsibility is not to imagine new worlds but to notice the existing one with greater clarity. This claim is not simply intuitive; it draws on a convergent body of theory from cognitive psychology, narratology, and educational philosophy, reviewed in the section that follows, which together suggest that attention, structure, and social meaning-making precede and enable what is popularly called "imagination." World-building therefore becomes less an act of fabrication than one of metamorphosis. Fictional worlds are assembled from observations, memories, emotions, social structures, moral questions, and human relationships already present in reality, and the purpose of education is to help students recognise these materials and consciously reshape them into narrative.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The workshop model draws on four overlapping bodies of theory: narrative psychology, which explains why human beings organise experience as story; structuralist and post-structuralist narratology, which explains why stories can be analysed as systems of recurring parts and contested voices; cognitive research on attention and creativity, which explains why noticing precedes inventing; and sociocultural learning theory, which explains why collaboration and dialogue are not incidental to creative development but constitutive of it. Each is introduced briefly here and returned to in the sections that discuss its pedagogical application.

Jerome Bruner's distinction between paradigmatic and narrative modes of thought is foundational. Bruner (1986) argued that narrative is not a decorative alternative to logical-scientific reasoning but a distinct and equally rigorous mode of making the world intelligible, organised around intention, time, and human particulars rather than general truth conditions. In a later essay, Bruner (1991) went further, proposing that human beings do not simply tell stories about experience but substantially construct their sense of reality through narrative. This claim supports treating storytelling as a cognitive and educational priority rather than a leisure activity layered on top of "real" learning.

Structuralist narratology supplies the workshop's second theoretical pillar. Vladimir Propp's (1968) morphological analysis of Russian folktales demonstrated that an enormous variety of surface stories could be reduced to a small, recurring set of narrative functions performed by a limited set of character roles. Joseph Campbell (1949) extended a structurally similar claim across world mythology with the monomyth, and Northrop Frye (1957) proposed the mapping of Western literature onto a small number of recurring archetypal modes. Taken together, this tradition supports the workshop's claim that there are, in an important structural sense, no entirely new stories — only new arrangements, voices, and contexts for recurring human concerns.

Post-structuralist and narratological theory supplies a necessary complication to this picture. Gérard Genette's (1980) work on focalisation demonstrated that the same underlying events produce entirely different narratives depending on whose perspective organises the telling, while Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) concept of dialogism emphasised that meaning in narrative is never singular but is produced through the interaction of multiple voices and social perspectives. Roland Barthes's (1977) essay on the death of the author further destabilised the idea of a single authoritative teller, proposing that meaning is completed by

readers and retellers rather than fixed permanently by an originating voice. Scholars of the literary fairy tale, notably Jack Zipes (2006) and Cristina Bacchilega (1997), have shown how this theoretical insight plays out historically: fairy tales survive precisely because each era rewrites them to recover previously silenced or marginalised perspectives. This body of theory grounds the workshop's exercises in narrative voice and perspective-shifting.

Cognitive research on attention and creativity grounds the workshop's emphasis on observation. J. P. Guilford's (1967) distinction between convergent and divergent thinking identified the generation of multiple possible responses to an open question as a distinct and trainable cognitive capacity, separate from the capacity to reach a single correct answer. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (1996) interview-based research on creative individuals across domains found that sustained, absorbed attention — not sudden inspiration — was the condition its subjects most consistently associated with their creative achievements. Ellen Langer's (1989) research on mindfulness similarly distinguished between mindless, automatic perception and mindful attention that actively notices distinctions and context, a distinction that maps closely onto the workshop's contrast between "looking" and "seeing."

Finally, sociocultural learning theory grounds the workshop's collaborative and dialogic exercises. Lev Vygotsky (1978) argued that higher cognitive functions, including the capacities required for sophisticated symbolic play and narrative construction, first develop in social interaction before being internalised individually. John Dewey (1938) argued, in a similar vein, that real learning comes from structured experience and inquiry rather than from the transmission of pre-formed content, while Paulo Freire (1970) and bell hooks (1994) each argued that education becomes most transformative when it is dialogic and treats learners as co-constructors of meaning rather than passive recipients. Together, this framework supports a workshop design in which observation, structural analysis, perspective-taking, and collaboration function not as sequential add-ons to creative writing but as its theoretical foundation.

III. STORYTELLING AS HUMAN MEANING-MAKING

Stories exist because human beings continually seek meaning in experience. Narrative psychology, particularly Bruner's (1991) account of the narrative construction of reality, maintains that individuals organise memory and experience through story structures rather than merely recording events, while literature enables readers to experience perspectives beyond their own lives.

Philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1997) has argued specifically that literary narrative cultivates what she calls the “narrative imagination” — the capacity to inhabit the position of a person unlike oneself — and that this capacity is a precondition for ethical and democratic citizenship rather than a merely aesthetic pleasure.

Rather than merely entertaining, stories perform various interrelated functions: they preserve cultural memory, transmit ethical values, generate empathy, question social structures, and imagine alternative futures for those who inherit them. The workshop grounding this paper deliberately shifts discussion away from plot mechanics toward these broader human purposes. Before students begin writing, they are invited to consider why stories exist at all, a philosophical entry point that helps learners understand writing not simply as an academic activity but as a uniquely human response to experience, consistent with Bruner’s (1986) claim that narrative thought is a fundamental and irreducible way of knowing rather than a secondary embellishment of logical thought.

IV. OBSERVATION BEFORE IMAGINATION

Perhaps the central pedagogical principle of the workshop is that writers are distinguished less by imagination than by attention. Popular culture often lauds creativity as spontaneous inspiration; however, many accomplished writers describe observation as their primary skill, and empirical creativity research broadly supports this self-report, since Csikszentmihalyi’s (1996) study of creative practitioners found sustained attentiveness to be a more consistent predictor of creative output than any single measure of raw imaginative capacity. Joan Didion (1979) famously remarked that “we tell ourselves stories in order to live,” emphasising that narrative comes from making sense of reality rather than escaping it.

Similarly, the figure of Sherlock Holmes — introduced by Arthur Conan Doyle in the late nineteenth century — offers a useful educational metaphor, not primarily as a detective but as an observer. Holmes notices details others overlook, and this distinction between looking and seeing becomes the foundation of creative practice, corresponding closely to Langer’s (1989) psychological distinction between mindless perception, which classifies experience into familiar categories and stops attending, and mindful attention, which continues to notice new distinctions within the familiar. In the workshop, students are challenged with deceptively simple questions: how many steps did they climb before entering the room; what object nearby has everyone else overlooked; and what ordinary detail suddenly appears significant once it is examined closely?

These exercises reveal that creativity often doesn’t begin with invention but with sustained attention.

Observation therefore becomes an intellectual discipline rather than merely a sensory activity. Students learn that every unnoticed object contains the possibility of narrative if examined carefully enough — an application of what Guilford (1967) would classify as divergent thinking, since the exercise rewards generating many possible significances for a single ordinary object rather than converging quickly on one correct interpretation.

1. EVERY PERSON ALREADY POSSESSES STORIES

A recurring obstacle in creative writing classrooms is students’ conviction that they have “nothing interesting to say.” This obstacle is not primarily technical but is closer to what Freire (1970) described as the internalisation of a “banking” model of education, in which students are positioned as passive recipients of knowledge rather than as authorities capable of generating meaning from their own experience.

To challenge this misconception, the workshop begins with a real example of a student whose success resulted not from extraordinary experience but from genuine concern for a social issue, with the emphasis placed not on literary ability but on conviction, compassion, and intellectual curiosity. This opening accomplishes several pedagogical goals at once: it dismantles the myth of the exceptional writer; it positions storytelling as accessible rather than elitist, echoing bell hooks’s (1994) argument that pedagogy becomes most transformative when it treats every learner’s lived experience as legitimate intellectual material; and it demonstrates that meaningful writing often begins with caring deeply about something in the world rather than searching for unusual experiences. Students therefore begin to grasp that every individual possesses unique observations unavailable to anyone else.

V. STORIES AS SHARED HUMAN STRUCTURES

One of the workshop’s most significant conceptual shifts involves helping students recognise that originality does not require inventing entirely new plots. This claim rests directly on the structuralist tradition of narrative analysis. Propp’s (1968) study of the Russian folktale identified a limited repertoire of narrative functions — such as an interdiction, a violation, a departure, and a resolution — that recur across superficially unrelated tales, while Campbell (1949) proposed a comparable recurring pattern across world mythology in the figure of the hero’s journey. Frye (1957) argued more broadly still that the whole of Western

literature could be understood as the reworking of a small number of archetypal narrative modes.

Drawing upon these classical understandings of narrative, students explore recurring human conflicts such as love, power, jealousy, sacrifice, identity, survival, belonging, and freedom. Contemporary films and novels are reduced to these underlying narrative patterns, and students quickly discover that many apparently different stories share remarkably similar structural foundations. The educational value of this exercise lies in separating story structure from storytelling voice: there may indeed be recurring narrative patterns, but each generation interprets them through new historical contexts, cultural experiences, and ethical concerns. Originality therefore emerges from perspective rather than novelty alone — a claim the workshop develops further, and complicates, in the following section on narrative voice.

VI. PERSPECTIVE AND NARRATIVE AUTHORITY

The workshop next introduces students to the idea that every story can be retold from multiple viewpoints. This activity operationalises Genette's (1980) concept of focalisation, which distinguishes the events of a story from the perspective through which those events are filtered and understood, and Bakhtin's (1981) related claim that narrative meaning is inherently dialogic, produced through the interplay of multiple, often unequal, voices rather than issuing from a single authoritative source.

Using familiar fairy tales such as *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Cinderella*, or *The Three Little Pigs*, students ask who decides who the villain is, what changes if another character narrates the events, and how power influences the way a story is told. This activity introduces concepts central to contemporary literary criticism, including narrative voice, focalisation, and the politics of representation, and Barthes's (1977) argument that a text's meaning is completed by its readers rather than fixed by its original author further supports treating every retelling as a legitimate act of authorship rather than a derivative exercise. Connections to writers such as Carol Ann Duffy further demonstrate how literature continually revises inherited narratives by recovering previously marginalised voices, a practice that folklore scholars Zipes (2006) and Bacchilega (1997) have each documented at length in their historical studies of the fairy tale's repeated cultural rewriting. Students consequently discover that stories remain culturally alive because they are continually rewritten rather than permanently fixed.

VII. WORLD-BUILDING THROUGH QUESTIONS

Perhaps the most important misconception surrounding world-building is that it requires elaborate fantasy settings populated by magical creatures or advanced technologies. The workshop challenges this assumption by proposing that every world — fictional or real — operates through systems of rules, an idea closely related to Donella Meadows's (2008) systems-thinking framework, in which complex behaviour emerges from a comparatively small number of underlying rules, feedback loops, and structural relationships rather than from surface complexity itself. These rules may concern language, education, law, economics, memory, family, technology, or religion.

World-building therefore begins with a single deceptively simple question: what happens if one rule changes? This single-rule-change method echoes Darko Suvin's (1979) influential theory of science fiction as a literature of "cognitive estrangement," in which a speculative work brings one significant novum — one deliberate deviation from the reader's empirical reality — and then reasons through its social and psychological consequences with logical consistency. Examples explored in the workshop include a world in which nobody can lie, a world in which everyone hears everyone else's thoughts, a world in which memory disappears every morning, a world in which emotions become visible, and a world in which time stops for one hour each day. These hypothetical questions immediately generate social, ethical, and political consequences, and students begin to understand that fictional worlds function less through decorative detail than through coherent systems of cause and effect.

VIII. THE PEDAGOGY OF "WHAT IF?"

Inquiry rather than invention becomes the driving force behind creativity. Many influential literary works can be understood as sustained explorations of a single speculative question, in keeping with Suvin's (1979) novum-based theory of speculative fiction introduced above: what if magic coexisted with ordinary life, what if surveillance controlled every aspect of society, what if suffering disappeared, or what if children became instruments of political spectacle?

Rather than encouraging students to begin writing immediately, the workshop asks them to produce multiple "What if?" questions without attempting answers. This postponement of solution-building cultivates intellectual curiosity while resisting premature closure, and it deliberately privileges Guilford's (1967) divergent-thinking phase of the creative process over the convergent phase, on the theory that student writers foreclose their most

interesting ideas when they move too quickly toward a single answer. Educationally, it encourages divergent thinking, one of the defining characteristics of creative cognition, and is consistent with Dewey's (1938) broader argument that genuine inquiry begins with a felt difficulty or open question rather than with received content to be reproduced.

IX. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND HUMAN CREATIVITY

The rapid emergence of generative artificial intelligence has transformed discussions surrounding creative writing education. Instead of presenting AI as either a threat or a replacement for writers, the workshop adopts a more balanced position, informed by Margaret Boden's (2004) influential taxonomy of creativity, which distinguishes combinatorial creativity, the novel recombination of familiar ideas, from exploratory creativity, the systematic exploration of an existing conceptual space, and from transformational creativity, the alteration of the rules that define the space itself.

Artificial intelligence excels at recognising patterns across existing texts. It can generate stylistically competent narratives by synthesising enormous quantities of prior writing, a capacity that maps most closely onto Boden's combinatorial and exploratory categories. Human storytelling, however, often begins before patterns exist, and is more closely associated with what Boden (2004) calls transformational creativity: the capacity to change the rules of the conceptual space rather than merely explore or recombine within it. Original narratives frequently emerge from personal observation, moral uncertainty, lived experience, emotional memory, ethical courage, and unresolved questions, dimensions that remain deeply connected to embodied human experience. Students are therefore encouraged to view AI as a valuable creative assistant rather than the origin of authentic narrative voice. This distinction is pedagogically important because it redirects attention toward what makes human creativity distinctive: experience transformed through reflection.

X. READING STORIES AS ARCHITECTS RATHER THAN CONSUMERS

An important transition within the workshop asks students to move from passive appreciation to analytical construction. Popular narratives are deconstructed through a simple sequential framework that moves from world to conflict, to character, to choice, to consequence, and finally to change. This framework functions as a pedagogical simplification of long-standing narrative-structure theory,

echoing both Gustav Freytag's nineteenth-century dramatic pyramid of exposition, rising action, climax, and resolution, and Tzvetan Todorov's (1971) structuralist model of narrative as a movement from equilibrium through disruption to a new equilibrium.

This model encourages students to see storytelling as a sequence of deliberate creative decisions rather than spontaneous inspiration, and by analysing narrative architecture in this way, learners begin recognising that every fictional world operates through interconnected design principles. Reading therefore becomes a form of reverse engineering that informs future creative practice.

XI. COLLABORATIVE WORLD-BUILDING

Creative writing is often imagined as an individual pursuit. The workshop challenges this assumption through collaborative exercises in which students collectively construct narratives by responding to one another's ideas, drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) claim that higher-order cognitive and symbolic capacities develop first through social interaction and only later become internalised as individual capacities, and on cooperative-learning research by Johnson and Johnson (1999) showing that structured collaborative tasks reliably produce deeper engagement and understanding than equivalent individual tasks.

Such activities demonstrate that stories evolve through dialogue, negotiation, revision, and shared imagination. Collaborative writing also mirrors contemporary creative industries, where novels, films, games, and digital media increasingly emerge through interdisciplinary teamwork, a phenomenon Henry Jenkins (2006) has described at the level of audiences and fan communities as "participatory culture," in which storytelling is understood as a distributed, collective activity rather than the output of a single isolated author. Consequently, students learn that creativity flourishes through interaction as much as through solitary inspiration.

XII. EDUCATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE

The workshop extends beyond creative writing instruction. Its underlying pedagogical model develops several broader competencies, including close observation, critical thinking, empathy, narrative analysis, ethical reasoning, systems thinking, collaborative learning, creative problem-solving, and reflective inquiry. These capacities align with widely used frameworks for twenty-first-century learning and with Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) revision of Bloom's taxonomy, in which "creating" sits at the apex of cognitive demand, above analysing and evaluating, while

remaining firmly grounded in literary study rather than displacing it.

Rather than separating literary appreciation from creative production, the workshop demonstrates that reading and writing enrich one another through continuous dialogue, and that the theoretical traditions reviewed above — narrative psychology, structuralist and post-structuralist narratology, cognitive research on attention and creativity, and sociocultural learning theory — are not decorative academic backdrop but the working assumptions on which each exercise depends.

XIII. CONCLUSION

World-building is frequently misunderstood as an exercise in unrestricted imagination. This paper has argued instead that meaningful fictional worlds arise from careful observation of reality, sustained inquiry, ethical reflection, and deliberate narrative design. It has traced these claims to specific and well-established theoretical traditions: Bruner's (1986, 1991) account of narrative as a mode of knowing, the structuralist and post-structuralist analyses of Propp (1968), Campbell (1949), Genette (1980), Bakhtin (1981), and Barthes (1977), the cognitive research on attention and creativity of Guilford (1967), Csikszentmihalyi (1996), and Langer (1989), and the sociocultural learning theory of Vygotsky (1978), Dewey (1938), and Freire (1970).

Students become writers not because they invent entirely new worlds but because they learn to see the existing one differently: observation precedes imagination, questions precede answers, and attention precedes invention. By repositioning storytelling as a practice of noticing rather than merely imagining, educators can help young writers discover that every meaningful story begins with something already present in the world — an overlooked detail, an uncomfortable question, an unexpected act of kindness, or an unresolved contradiction.

The newest stories will not emerge solely from greater technical sophistication or more elaborate fantasy. They will emerge from individuals who learn to observe deeply, think critically, and transform lived experience into narratives that invite others to see differently. In this sense, world-building becomes not only a literary skill grounded in a coherent and citable body of theory, but also an educational practice that cultivates empathy, reflection, and imaginative citizenship.

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