Creative Writing

Purpose

To critically read the following unfinished short story on a teenage kid’s experience with possible lead poisoning in their neighborhood.

Overview

This section will require students to critically read an unfinished creative writing piece, answer factual questions concerning the piece, and then either finish this story or create their own story about their own neighborhood and possible environmental issues.

Time

1 two hour session for the reading and initial analysis of the creative writing piece given, and then assign the development of their own creative writing piece as a homework assignment.

Key Concepts

Lead is a complex environmental issue that can affect families in the community. Teenagers can effectively investigate lead and other environmental health issues, as well as actively work to change their own environments as communicators and advocate for change.

Skills

This section in its entirety can help in creative writing as well as critical reading. It is also useful in demonstrating that science has both a subjective and creative aspect. Finally, written and verbal communications are stressed.

Materials

The handouts are the only materials needed. Access to word processing software and Internet would be useful for production of the writing and essay products.

Background

There is considerable creative writing associated with environmental health, ranging from *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau to *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carsen. Environmental health issues affect societies in terms of their histories, health, social structure, and economics. However, environmental issues also affect individuals. Individuals of all ages can investigate and react constructively to remediate and prevent environmental health issues.

This purposely unfinished creative writing piece by an Educational Specialist of the Miami Dade County Schools was written after participating in the development of environmental health curriculum for the AMBIENT Project. It incorporates specific cultural details (such as the title *Malade Papillion*) but it also illustrates how any teenager
can investigate and act when faced with an environmental health problem in their own backyard.

**Procedure**

Read the following story entitled *Malade Papillion* (Sick Butterfly) by Miami Dade County Public School Educational Specialist and member of the AMBIENT Curriculum Team, Paula Nelson, about a Miami teenager living in a Haitian neighborhood. This teenager is worried not only about various children in the neighborhood who are getting sick, possibly from different lead exposures.

- Who are the different children (or *malades Papillions*) getting sick and what could be their possible lead exposures as described in this story?
- Where else could the kids in the story seek information on lead poisoning?
- What else could the kids in the story do about the possible lead poisonings in their neighborhood?
- Do lead poisoned children always seem sick? Is this story factually accurate? Or does it exaggerate to tell a more dramatic story?

You Can:
- Finish the story of the *Malade Papillion*, incorporating the issues you have analyzed from the story above;

Or you can:
- Write your own description of your neighborhood. Describe the place and the people, and how you feel about your neighborhood. If you know of any environmental problems with your neighborhood, describe them. What can you and others do to improve your neighborhood? You can write this as a short story, a letter, a journal/diary entry, an essay, a newspaper article, a poem, or even a brochure.
- As an alternative to writing prose, students could also write poetry, *haiku*, a rap song or create visual art expressing issues raised by the classroom discussion of lead in the environment.

Then you can:
- Present your work to your classmates.

**Further Investigation**

Students can be asked to seek out other creative writing literature on environmental health issues to read and write book reports with presentations. Some recommended writers include:

Rachel Carson: *Silent Spring*
Annie Dillard: *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*
Edward Abbey: *The Best of Abbey*
Barbara Kingsolver: *Animal Dreams*
Fred Bodsworth: *The Last of the Curlews*
James Fenimore Cooper: *Last of the Mohicans*
Jack London: *Call of the Wild*
Willa Cather: *O Pioneer*
Edgar Rice Burroughs: *Tarzan of the Apes*
Mary Austin: *The Land of Little Rain*
Herman Melville: *Moby Dick*
Henry David Thoreau: *Walden*
Mark Twain: *Life on the Mississippi*
Walt Whitman: *Leaves of Grass*
Bradford Torrey: *On Foot in Yosemite*
John Muir: *Steep Trails*
Isabell Bird: *Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*

Students can adapt their own stories or book reports for newspapers or magazines or even put together a book of their stories to distribute to other students, family members, or others. They can write to their Congress people to express their opinion on the environmental issue(s) in their own neighborhood, accompanied by their story. They can create a website and post their stories as an environmental health writing project.

**Student Assessment**

Give the following creative writing components to each student as a guide to their creative writing products:

- Decide what facts are present in the creative writing piece
- Briefly summarize these facts, as well as sources of information and possible courses of action
- Decide whether to finish this story or create a story of your own neighborhood and a possible environmental health issue
- Create this story describing your feelings as well as facts
- Practice reading this story aloud in a convincing manner
- Be prepared to answer questions concerning your story

Assign points for the following components of the critical writing products:

- Were the facts correctly identified?
- Were these facts correctly summarized?
- Were there sources of information and possible courses of action presented?
- Did the creative writing story of the student describe how the student feels about their neighborhood and possible environmental health issue?
- Could the student answer questions from the audience about their story?
Malade Papillon (Sick Butterfly)
By Paula Nelson

Maman always called the children at the playground “Papillons” because she said that the little ones looked like bright, colorful butterflies fluttering around the park. Maman sits on the flaking orange painted wooden bench with sadness in her eyes. She’s watching my three-year old sister, Pascal, trying to make mud pies near the bottom of the slide. She peers up at her friends as they glide down the peeling play set. Every afternoon Maman and Pascal go to the park around 4:30 to join the other mothers and toddlers in their play group. Today Maman is sad because she does not know why her petit Papillon is always tired.

I decided to go across the street to the local gas station to get my little sister an ice cream cone. This landmark building was built in the 1920's. Over the manager’s desk is a vintage sign from 1926 that reads, “Ethyl is back”. I often wondered "Who is Ethyl and why did she come back?" Once inside, I ran into another malade Papillon (sick butterfly) who is the little brother of Claude, one of my classmates at Ambient Senior High. Jean-Pierre is four years old and lately he has had a hard time paying attention and concentrating just like my little sister Pascal.

I asked Claude how was his Tante (Aunt) Marie doing these days because I hadn’t seen her at the park in a very long time. Claude’s Tante Marie is a local merchant who is known for importing beautiful ceramics from the Caribbean. We love to go to her house on Saturday mornings because she makes the best poisson avec bananes (fish and plantains), and presents it in one of her wonderful ceramic bowls with colorful begonias painted on the bottom. Last time I saw her she was expecting a baby. Claude informed me that Tante Marie had a baby boy who is now 4 months old. The baby has colic, so that is why we don’t see Tante Marie as often as we used to.

I went back to the playground and gave Pascal her ice cream, and she reached up and gave me a big hug. Looking over her shoulder I noticed my best friend Marjorie, as she walked slowly past the decorative water fountain, with her little sister Chantal. Marjorie was carrying Chantal because she was very weak and pale. “It must be the flu”, Marjorie said, but I was beginning to wonder.

Later that evening I decided to call Claude and Marjorie. On the three-way call I asked them to meet me during lunch tomorrow at our favorite café across the street from Ambient High School.

During lunch the following day, Claude and Marjorie met me at Café Ambient. They asked me why did I look so serious today. “Sak Pasé” (What's going on?) Marjorie asked. After talking we felt that we all were seeing similar problems within our families. This made us quite concerned, and we wondered what could we do about the situation.

After school we went down the street to the Touissant L’Overture clinic. We desperately wanted to find out what was affecting the little children of our neighborhood. Dr. Marlene Cadet came out to speak to us. She was a very kind woman who understood our concerns. Based on the blood test results from our children, her diagnosis was lead poisoning. The doctor explained that usually lead poisoning had no symptoms at all.
Claude felt that Tante Marie’s baby was too young to be poisoned and asked how could that be. Marjorie asked the doctor, “Isn’t lead a type of metal? How can babies and little children get sick from it?” Dr. Cadet explained that lead poisoning…

TO BE CONTINUED