

Imagine Nation

by Benjamin Zephaniah



hmm

Creative Partnerships

Introduction

Benjamin Zephaniah was commissioned by Creative Partnerships London East in April 2004 to write a poem for Arts and Minds. This seminar for representatives from the education and creative sectors was aimed at sharing thinking, experience and practical ways of developing practice around preferred learning styles and creativity. Benjamin's brief was to write a poem that explored the place of creativity and imagination in school. Inspired by the quality and strength of Imagine Nation we commissioned filmmaker Eelyn Lee to make a short film. We feel the final piece is a dynamic exposition, which articulates aspirations, and the potential of what school can and should be.

Apples & Snakes, one of England's leading organisers of performance poetry, have created a series of classroom resources to support the use of the Imagine Nation DVD in school. The full versions of these resources can be found on www.applesandsnakes.org

We hope you find the Imagine Nation DVD a creative and exciting learning resource.

Steve Moffitt

Director

Creative Partnerships London East

For further information, case studies and resources go to: **www.creative-partnerships.com**

Imagine Nation

You cannot hold, force or control
The brave imagination,
From paintings that are bright and bold
To poetry creation,
You cannot legislate against ideas
For you will find,
You cannot stop young pioneers,
It's all in the mind.

Teachers inspire students and
Students inspire teachers,
And if done write throughout the land
We'll all become great readers,
There's joy in mathematics
When a beauty is designed,
There's even art in physics,
It's all in the mind.

Bring thought police in uniforms
The music will not stop,
Excited brains will not conform
And nor will sweet Hip-Hop,
Now schools can become temples
Where the students bump and grind,
It's all so experimental,
It's all in the mind.

We beings need adventure
Just like we need a heart,
It's more than lazy leisure
Life's empty without art,
Ideas are like the universe
They cannot be confined,
And our ideas are so diverse
It's all in the mind.

When you look at all the negative
It's only black and white,
But when you get creative
It's all colour and light,
So why live in the darkness?
And why be colour-blind?
Our art brings love and brightness,
It's all in the mind.

You cannot put a price upon
A dancer with great action,
Nor can you put a price upon
A teacher full of passion,
What's possible is endless
When these talents are combined,
What's possible is priceless,
And
It's all in the mind.

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Resources

Exercise one

Michael Lord

The teacher should hand out the poem and read it with the class. Students should be invited to discuss their first impressions, making notes on the board or in notebooks. Students should then be asked to select a particular line from the poem that has significant meaning to them. They should discuss its personal meaning. The teacher should sum up the feelings of the students on the board.

Understanding the idea of suppressing creativity

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The teacher should lead a discussion on recent historical events that have encouraged the suppression or restriction of creative expression. For example, during the aftermath of 9/11, filmmakers and musicians could not be critical of the American government without seeming unpatriotic, whilst books such as Michael Moore's *Stupid White Men* were removed from publication.

Students should conduct internet research of different historical periods that have seen mass creative/artistic suppression. For example:

16th Century: Africans in the Americas not permitted to engage in their traditional singing, drumming and dancing as it was seen as a dangerous source of inspiration, hope and freedom by their European captors.

18th Century: Theatre was banned in England due to its supposed radical influence on the working class populace.

20th Century: During the McCarthy era innovative writers, artists and filmmakers were blacklisted as communist sympathisers.

Students should be asked to present their findings to the rest of the class.

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The teacher should lead a discussion around how the students feel their own creativity is limited or restricted.



Exercise two

Aoife Mannix

Critical Feedback

The teacher should ask the students to write in one sentence what they think the poem is about. They should:

Write down one thing that they like about the poem.

Write down one image or phrase that they particularly liked or that they can remember from the poem.

Write down one question that they would like to ask the poet about the poem.

It's All In The Mind

The poem uses the expression 'it's all in the mind' as the last line of every verse. The saying 'it's all in your mind' is generally used to imply that something is not real and therefore not worth paying attention to. However, the poet is changing the original meaning, saying that what is inside our heads is a treasure in itself. Repetition gives the poem both rhythm and structure and reinforces the point being made by the poet. The poetry brings words to life by playing with their double meanings. Rather than using clichés where a phrase has been used so often that it has become dull, the poet is able to grab our attention by waking us up to the possibilities of language.

The teacher should ask the class to write down an example of a saying or proverb. An example of this could be 'money doesn't grow on trees.' So where does it grow? Students should write a three verse poem interpreting this phrase in its literal sense, responding to what it actually says rather than the meaning usually attached to it. The phrase should be used as the first line of each verse.

Students shouldn't worry too much about making sense or rhyming, it's more important to think of interesting images, even if they are surreal. Money could grow in banks or in fields or in people's pockets. If money did grow on trees, how would this change the way we see the world? Would it make people more or less greedy? Would people worship the trees or chop them down?

Another example could be 'may all your dreams come true.'

Students could think of specific dreams or nightmares that they can remember. If the things in dreams were to start happening in reality, what would the world be like?

Students should be given approximately fifteen minutes to write their poem. If they're not happy with the proverb they originally chose, they should feel free to think of another one. They should then be invited to share their work with the rest of the class.



Exercise three

Jacob Sam-La Rose

Benjamin's poem is about imagination, and how important it is. Take a moment to think about imagination. How important is it to you? How often do you use your ability to imagine things in the course of a day? Does it help you to create things? Does it keep you entertained? Does it help you to learn?

"Ideas are like the universe,
They cannot be confined"

We're going to start with a 10 minute free write (write freely, without barriers or boundaries). When you start writing, don't stop until the time's up. Don't let anything hold you up. What we're interested in here is the flow of ideas. Don't worry about structure, or "getting it right" to begin with. Your only limitation is the clock – you've only got 10 minutes: make sure you use every one!

Part one: raw material

Imagine that your imagination has been locked in a box. First, tell me about the box that your imagination is locked in. What does it look like? What's it made of? How does it feel to touch it? Is it cold or warm? How big is it? Is it covered in thick, heavy chains? Or is it a small, fragile container, like the containers that take away food come in?

Next, when you open the box, what do you see? What does your imagination look like? Is it a concrete thing, like a key, or a bike? A heart or a painting, as in Benjamin's poem? Or something else. An ocean, a universe or a flame? Something that doesn't look like it should fit in the box at all?

Finally, when you retrieve your imagination from the box, what's the first thing you do with it?

Part two: cooking the piece

If you've written for ten minutes, you'll have a lot of different ideas, and some you'll like more than others. Go through your free write and pick out the ideas that particularly grab you, the things that stand out, things that might sound strange, but make their own kind of sense. These are the ideas you're going to use in your piece.

Here's a suggested structure for your piece: work towards a list poem of three stanzas, each stanza containing 5 lines or ideas from a part of the free write. Try to edit your ideas so they fit into one or two lines, and put the stanzas in the same order as the parts of the free-write.

Of course, your ideas might stretch beyond that suggested structure, and as Benjamin says in the poem, ideas "cannot be confined." What would happen if you put the stanzas in a different order, or came up with a different title, or if you had more or less than 3 stanzas? When you're putting your piece into a structure, what if there's one idea that starts to take over the entire piece? Feel free to explore.

Part three: shaping it up

When you've got some ideas down, here are some things to think about for developing your ideas into a piece:

Are you going to write it in one verse; or maybe three verses, one for each question? Or are there any other ways you could break your ideas up into stanzas? What's most appropriate?

Although this exercise could be used to develop a longer piece of writing – an imaginative short story perhaps – what we're trying to write here is a poem. Because it's a poem the ideas don't have to follow each other in the way a story might work. What order are your ideas going to go in? Your piece could start by showing what you'd do with your object (your imagination), then by describing the box, then by what it looks like...



Apples & Snakes

believes that performance poetry should be an immediate, entertaining and inspiring means of expression and communication, an alternative to formal poetry readings and recitals. It aims to introduce poetry in a live and dynamic context to new audiences across England in both performance and education.

Apples & Snakes stretches the boundaries of poetry in education and performance. We aim to give voice to challenging, diverse and dynamic poets and encourage the appreciation of poetry by all.

As well as hosting regular performance events we work with a range of poets, rappers and storytellers across England to run inspiring workshops and projects in schools, which are designed to make poetry exciting, accessible and interactive for all ages.

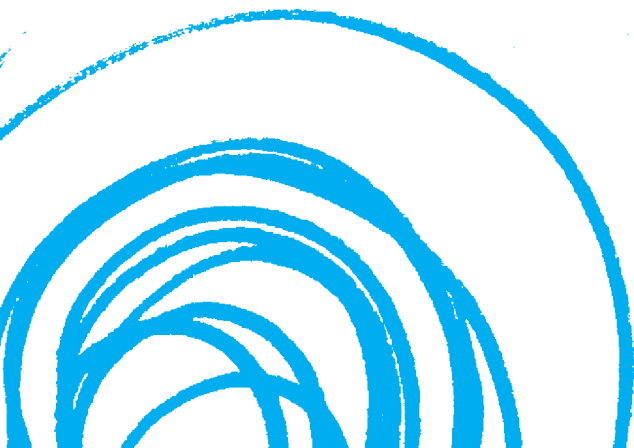
For more information about poets Aoife Mannix, Jacob Sam la Rose and Michael Lord go to www.applesandsnakes.com

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Benjamin Zephaniah

is a poet, novelist, playwright, musician and political activist. Born in the Handsworth district of Birmingham, his work is influenced by the music and poetry of Jamaica. He has lived in the London Borough of Newham since 1980 and has worked with many local schools. His writing for young people, although fun, has a serious message and concerns racism, animal rights, pollution and equality. He was appointed to the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education in 1998. His passions include jogging, kung fu and football. For more information on Benjamin and his work visit www.benjaminzephaniah.com

Eelyn Lee

has a background in fine art and visual theatre. She has been working with film and video since the late 90's, using the moving image in a variety of contexts – video installation, combined film and live performance as well as narrative filmmaking.

Eelyn is fast developing a reputation for taking a creative approach to documentary filmmaking. Her extensive experience of working with a diverse range of community groups, schools and individuals is evident in her recent film *Beneath the Hood*, a 50 minute documentary about a pupil referral unit in Hackney.

Eelyn manages her own production company, Eelyn Lee Productions Ltd.



exciting minds

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