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Short Communication

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Aesthetic Literacy and the Voices of Youth: Creative Writing, Navigational Competence and Educational Practice

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Abstract

This article explores how creative writing can strengthen aesthetic literacy and navigational competence in upper-secondary education. Drawing on two published student anthologies from a Danish upper-secondary school (2024-2025), the article analyses essays on time and poems on paths as expressions of how young people navigate identity, uncertainty, and ethical orientation. It argues that creative writing enables adolescents to transform experience into symbolic form and to practise reflective judgement and imagination. The article also highlights implications for teacher education, suggesting that university programmes in languages, culture and literature should cultivate aesthetic and creative competences alongside academic skills.

Keywords: Aesthetic literacy; Creative writing; Navigational competence; Youth expression; upper-secondary education; Identity formation.

Introduction

In grammar lessons, time and movement often appear as mnemonic devices: the accusative for duration; the accusative for movement along a path. In Denmark, such rules are sometimes remembered through small rhyming verses used in schools for generations¹. These linguistic miniatures remind us that poetic form has long accompanied learning, even in the most technical

corners of grammar.

Yet for adolescents, “time” and “path” are not merely grammatical abstractions; they are central metaphors for self-understanding, identity formation, and the attempt to navigate a world marked by acceleration, uncertainty, and expectation.

¹ The traditional Danish rhymes run: “*Tiden, hvor længe – akkusativ, drenge!*” and “*Vejen, ad hvilken man går – i akkusativ står.*” Both rely on internal rhyme (*længe/drenge; går/står*) and illustrate how poetic devices have long been used to support grammatical learning.



Over the past two years, students at a Danish upper-secondary school (Herlev Gymnasium & HF) have explored these metaphors through two school-wide writing initiatives. In 2024, students published their personal essays on time in the anthology *Fortællinger om tid* (*Stories of Time*, Siboni, ed.), to which I contributed the foreword *Tiden. Et kulturhistorisk snapshot* (*Time: A Cultural-Historical Snapshot*) [1]. In 2025, students contributed poems on paths for a forthcoming anthology, also with my foreword [2]. These publicly available texts constitute the empirical basis of this article and offer nuanced insights into adolescent life in contemporary Denmark.

Drawing on this corpus, I argue that **creative writing should be an integral component of upper-secondary education**. Beyond fostering linguistic proficiency, creative writing develops **aesthetic literacy**—the capacity to sense, interpret, and shape experience [3]—and strengthens **navigational competence**, understood here as the ability to navigate independently and with integrity in a hyper-complex society, drawing on cognitive, emotional, ethical, and aesthetic resources [4].

This short communication does not present a large-scale empirical study but uses published student work to articulate pedagogical insights relevant to teachers and educational researchers.

Youth Perspectives on Time and Paths

Time as pressure and acceleration

Several essays describe time as strained by digital saturation and constant demands for attention. One student observes that “*Vi har ødelagt vores opfattelse af tid gennem uendelig scrolling*” (*We have ruined our sense of time through endless scrolling*), while another notes that “*Denne konstante tilgængelighed [...] har skabt en kultur, hvor vi næsten ikke kan tåle ventetid*” (*This constant availability has created a culture where we can hardly tolerate waiting*). These reflections align with research on attention erosion and temporal acceleration in digital environments [5], and reveal how adolescents articulate temporal pressure not only as a cognitive experience but as an affective and cultural condition.

Time as ageing, memory, and irreversibility

Students also reflect on time as a force that shapes the body and carries memory. One writer notes that “*Tiden viser sig i rynker. Den viser sig i hår, som holder minder*” (*Time shows itself in wrinkles, in hair that holds memories*), while another expresses a sharper existential insight: “*Et tabt stykke guld kan findes igen, et tabt stykke tid aldrig*” (*A lost piece of gold can be found again; a lost piece of time never*). Such formulations show adolescents engaging with themes—mortality, irreversibility, embodied temporality—typically associated with philosophical discourse [6], yet rendered here with striking linguistic economy.

Time as waiting, anticipation, and future orientation

Many students describe an enduring tendency to live toward the next stage of life, noting that “*Vi venter konstant på det næste trin i*

livet” (*We constantly wait for the next step in life*). Another elaborates that “*Som mennesker har vi en tendens til at leve i fremtiden, altid med blikket rettet mod det næste kapitel*” (*We tend to live in the future, always looking toward the next chapter*). Time is thus experienced not merely as duration but as a psychological tension between aspiration and presence, revealing how anticipatory thinking shapes adolescents’ daily experience of temporality.

Paths as movement, resistance, and self-formation

The poetry collection brings complementary metaphors. One poem declares that “*Der er så mange veje, men ingen GPS til livet*” (*There are so many roads, but no GPS for life*), while another describes a self gradually fading: “*Jeg var en vejstribe, der blev mere og mere gennemsigtig*” (*I was a road stripe becoming more and more transparent*). A third explores existential agency: “*Jeg troede det var mig der skabte vejen, men måske er det vejen der skaber mig*” (*I thought I created the path, but perhaps the path creates me*).

Students also articulate psychological landscapes, as in “*Tankerne går deres egne veje / som snoede veje uden ende*” (*Thoughts go their own ways, like winding roads without end*), and political critique: “*Men Gaza fører ingen steder hen / som en spærret vej*” (*But Gaza leads nowhere—like a blocked road*). These metaphors reveal how young writers use path imagery to negotiate agency, vulnerability, and the limits of choice in contemporary life.

Time as intergenerational experience

Students also frame time relationally, as when one writes: “*Når jeg ser i spejlet ...*” (*When I look in the mirror...*). Elsewhere, inherited wisdom appears in the reminder: “*Bare nyd tiden ...*” (*Just enjoy the time...*).

The Educational Value of Creative Writing

Aesthetic literacy

Creative writing allows students to transform impressions into structured, symbolic expressions—processes educational theory identifies as aesthetic learning [7]. These processes integrate sensing, imagination, interpretation, and communication, providing learners with holistic ways of engaging with experience. This is consistent with findings from writing research showing that structured or thematically framed prompts can support, rather than restrict, creative performance by reducing cognitive load [8].

Friedrichsen’s work on aesthetic competence shows that poetry activates *attention*, *imagination*, and *reflective judgement*, enabling learners to engage deeply with ambiguity and form [9].

The student material illustrates this vividly: adolescents employ metaphor, imagery, and narrative to shape experience and communicate nuanced emotional and conceptual insights.

Navigational competence

Nordic research on aesthetic learning demonstrates that creative practices foster *autonomy*, *self-understanding*, and *a tolerance for uncertainty* [10]. These qualities are central to what

Biesta (2017) describes as the educational task of helping students to exist well in a world they have not made [11].

In literacy research, the term *navigational competence* has also been used in a more specific sense to describe the skills needed to read effectively online: setting reading goals, finding and evaluating digital information, monitoring one's own understanding, and repairing breakdowns in comprehension [12]. This digital-literacy perspective highlights important strategic dimensions of navigation—such as “way-finding”, source evaluation, and metacognitive control—in a hypertext environment.

In this article, I draw on that insight but use **navigational competence in a broader educational sense**: as the ability to navigate independently and with integrity in a hyper-complex society, drawing on cognitive, emotional, ethical, and aesthetic resources. In this extended sense, creative writing fosters navigational competence by giving students a space to test voices, rehearse ethical positions, and articulate uncertainty. When a student asks:

“Glemmer vi i denne evige venten at være til stede i nuet?”

(Do we, in this endless waiting, forget to be present in the now?),

she is not only displaying reflective reading skills, but also practising the kind of existential orientation that supports living thoughtfully amid complexity.

Cognitive and linguistic development

Creative writing broadens vocabulary, syntactic flexibility, and conceptual range. Studies consistently show transfer effects across domains: creative expression strengthens analytical writing, reading comprehension, and metalinguistic awareness [13]. Students who write poetically learn to inhabit language as choice, nuance, and possibility.

Identity, voice, and agency

Aesthetic learning theory—from Dewey to Vygotskij and contemporary Scandinavian scholarship—suggests that creative processes allow learners to integrate emotion, cognition, and cultural experience [14].

When teachers adopt a coaching stance rather than a purely corrective one, students feel permitted to explore identity and voice. This fosters agency and resilience—qualities visible throughout the two school anthologies.

Community and social imagination

Creative writing produces shared meaning-making. Reading one another's texts supports empathy, recognition, and relational understanding. The published student texts exemplify how schools can create communities of voice and contribute to students' sense of belonging.

Implications for Higher Education

Many graduates in languages, culture and literature eventually

become upper-secondary teachers. If aesthetic literacy, creative competence, and navigational competence are essential for the next generation of pupils, then the educators who teach them must themselves have encountered and practised these capacities during their university studies.

This situation reflects a more general discrepancy in Danish higher education. The report *Fremtidens sprogfag* (The Future of Language Education) (2003) already highlighted “aesthetic understanding” as one of four key competences that should guide the development of language programmes [15]. Despite this, such dimensions have not been integrated into most study regulations, where the emphasis continues to fall almost exclusively on analytical and descriptive academic skills. The distance between policy ambition and curricular practice thus remains considerable.

As an illustrative example, an analysis of the most recent curriculum for German Language and Culture at the University of Copenhagen reveals an important gap. While each examination is framed through the categories of knowledge, skills, and competences, none of the listed competences include aesthetic, creative, or navigational dimensions. Instead, the formulations emphasise academic operations such as structuring, analysing, defining, explaining, reflecting, reporting, and planning. These are essential components of scholarly formation, yet they leave little room for cultivating the creative and aesthetic capacities that are, in practice, central to language and literature.

This omission is striking, given that university research in the humanities routinely engages with aesthetics, interpretation, and symbolic form. Furthermore, the existing course Advanced Translation already teaches students to make intuitive, imaginative, and artistically grounded translational choices. Extending such insights to include creative writing would therefore be a natural and pedagogically coherent development.

Introducing a competence such as “the ability to work creatively with language, writing, and aesthetic expression” would align university curricula with the demands placed on future teachers and with broader societal needs. Such competencies are not only relevant for those who enter teaching; they are increasingly important across professions that require linguistic sensitivity, cultural imagination, and ethical navigation.

Recommendations for Practice

1. **Provide interpretive openness:** Prompts should invite, not prescribe, meaning-making.
2. **Emphasise process over product:** Exploration and revision are pedagogical engines.
3. **Adopt a coaching stance:** Teachers support emerging voices without steering content.
4. **Integrate creative writing across subjects:** Aesthetic learning strengthens literacy, reflection, and disciplinary understanding.

5. **Create authentic platforms for publication:** Printed anthologies enhance ownership and motivation.
6. **Use student writing as cultural evidence:** These texts reveal emotional, ethical, and social landscapes crucial for contemporary pedagogy.
7. **Integrate aesthetic and creative competences into university curricula:** University programmes in languages, culture and literature should offer students opportunities to practise creative writing, aesthetic reflection and imaginative linguistic work. This aligns teacher education with the competencies required in upper-secondary classrooms and strengthens graduates' broader navigational capacities across professions.

Conclusion

The essays and poems produced by students at a Danish upper-secondary school demonstrate that adolescents possess remarkable aesthetic, emotional, and conceptual capacities. Creative writing provides a powerful educational space where they articulate complexity, develop aesthetic literacy, and cultivate the navigational competence essential for contemporary life.

Research on aesthetic learning underscores that such processes are not peripheral but central to holistic education: they unite sensing, imagination, interpretation, and communication.

Creative writing is therefore not merely an enrichment activity; it is a pedagogical path—one students walk themselves, yet one that profoundly shapes who they become. These insights also point to the importance of embedding aesthetic and creative competences in higher education, ensuring that future teachers and graduates in languages, culture and literature are equipped to support such learning in schools and beyond.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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