

## Teaching English in Multi-disciplinary ways

### Basil Mills

Amazwi South African Museum of Literature, better known as Amazwi, attempts teaching in a fun way by harvesting children's creativity through its collection. Through Amazwi's Education and Public Programme and through its Education Officer, Basil Mills, the museum uses storytelling, exhibitions, visual art, and interactions with nature. This way it really helps learners and tertiary students, especially second language English speakers and those with learning disabilities.

Basil has extensive knowledge of African bush, animals, reptiles, human history, animal rescue and rehabilitation. He has been involved in cultural heritage restoration projects, craft, wagon building, horse training, blacksmith forge work, and is a sculptor as well as being an experienced theatre producer and storyteller. He draws on much of these talents and skills to inspire the children with adventurous imagination and free range of exploration in things like potjie cooking, mixed with reality and fantasy to instil confidence in speaking English as a language of teaching and learning.

Preparing for these camps means approaching campsites, game reserves, farmers, to help him run excursions and eco-literary English reading and storytelling camps. That helps to expand on how the storytelling reading camps are to unfold, for example, the Discovery Camp which is based on the legends of the Eastern Cape coast. Others include the story of Nongqawuse's prophecy and the cattle killing saga, the arrival of early explorers such as Dias and Vasco da Gama, Pirates, shipwrecks and myths and legends of the sea. Interesting and valuable heritage that include *Abathwa's* (KhoiSan) archaeological sites are also visited. Children often find themselves reading and writing poems in the sand.

One notable case study is the annual Reading Camp which is co-organised by the Holy Cross monastery school. In that reading camp, about 18 children are selected from 12 different primary schools around Makhanda. They are encouraged to learn to read in English. The camp was running for five days at the Assegaai Trail game reserve. The morning programmes would have English teachers and students as volunteers. They helped the children with phonics, encoding, decoding words, comprehension, reading and writing strategies. A time would be set aside to read stories and books for pleasure as well as using games and fun activities to help with English vocabulary. Basil then organised the afternoon sessions by giving demonstrations and myths and legends stories on South African reptiles, trails into the Valley Bushveld. The evenings were times for fireside stories and bush theatre. Other day activities would include game drives organised by the Kariega Game Reserve, an excursion to the Kenton on Sea coast, and artworks on a themed animal story. A very important aspect of the camp was the invitation of a notable South African children author to talk and read to the children. Previously invited authors included Margurite Poland, Gcina Mhlophe, Harry Owen and Madoda Ndlakuse.

The camp used to be sustained by funds that were obtained from Kentucky in the United States. Sadly, that funding had subsided, causing the camp to be scaled down drastically. The camp was revamped as a two-day ABC Reading Camp (Amakhala Book and Conservation Reading Camp). Amazwi continues to offer personnel support and invest time in organising while the Amakhala Game Reserve sponsor local farm and rural children from nearby Sidbury and Paterson schools. The revamped camp has added journalism and game viewing. The children have an opportunity to visit Harold Trollope's Vukani Museum and the children are taken on a trail in the valley to 'interview plants'. The children encounter some interesting surprises while on foot by 'meeting and greeting' giraffes, rhinos, warthogs, and many other animals. In the evening, like in the old days, they will present a story around the fire.

The next day, they would meet a South African author who reads his or her books to them. Each child is also presented with an autographed copy of the author's book to take home. The books are sponsored by the Amakhala Game reserve. Almost all the camps are documented with pictures that are shared with the schools and parents.

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Basil Mills is the Education Officer at Amazwi South African Museum of Literature (formerly the National English Literary Museum), an **agency of the Department of Arts and Culture**.

25A Worcester Street

MAKHANDA 6139

Telephone: 046 622 7042

E-Mail: [b.c.mills@amazwi.museum](mailto:b.c.mills@amazwi.museum)

Twitter: [https://twitter.com/amazwi\\_museum](https://twitter.com/amazwi_museum)

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/AmazwiMuseum/>