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## Teachers as writers: learning together

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## **Teachers as Writers: Learning Together**

**Teresa Grainger**

### **Abstract**

*This paper reports upon the insights gained through working with teachers as writers at their own level. As part of a two year research project into the development of children's voice and verve in writing, a group of fourteen teachers' reflective journeys as writers were documented, two other groups of teachers and one group of student teachers also took part in writers' workshop across the same period. The data encompassed: questionnaires, observations and teacher' commentaries on their own writing as well as interviews. A number of issues emerged, including: the tension between public and private writing and the security of the writing environment; authenticity in modelling writing; the importance of re-reading writing at the point of composition; the significance of choice and autonomy in writing and the potency of drama and writing as an ideational and reflective tool. The consequences for classroom practice are also considered. It is argued that in order to enhance the teaching of writing, teachers and student teachers need real opportunities to write at their own level and reflect upon the process.*

**Key words :** writers, authentic modelling, re-reading writing, autonomy, engagement , reflection.

### **Introduction**

In recent years in the UK, teachers have become pressured to prove their efficacy in a heavily regulated and inspected system, they have been expected to ensure that prescribed teaching objectives are covered and that learners reach ever higher national targets. Arguably, such accountability and control has reduced opportunities to promote both children's and teachers' creative engagement in the curriculum (e.g. Sedgwick, 2001; Craft, 2000; Prentice, 2000). It has also affected teachers' perceptions of their role in the process: are they as Mortimore

(1999) asks, ‘architects or bricklayers?’ Teachers of writing need a secure knowledge about language to lay firm foundations, but since ‘teaching kids to read and write should be an artistic event’ (Freire, 1985:79), they also need to be inspired designers who are themselves artistically engaged in the process. All teachers are professionally concerned as managers of learning, but they also need to be individually and aesthetically involved as fellow artists and writers in the classroom. For if teachers of writing don’t actually write – or even consciously talk creatively – in the way they expect children to do, then, as Betty Rosen (1991) observes, they will neither maximise their creative potential nor fully understand the challenge of being a writer. In working to create a classroom community of writers who choose to write, teachers must also write, perceiving themselves as writers, learners and language artists. ‘The experience and practice of the teacher-as-artist/composer is at the heart of the pedagogic activity’ (Robinson and Ellis, 1999:75) and in most other artistic domains such as piano, ballet or sculpture for example, teachers are often practitioners in their field. This is not often the case in relation to writing, particularly at the primary phase.

Far too many teachers are not writers in any but the most superficial sense...  
They do not know that writing, as much as music or art, exists in a tradition of its own which is a resource for generating meanings. They have never used writing as a way of exploring possibilities or reflecting upon their lives. They do not really understand what it means to be a writer.

(Geekie, Cambourne and Fitzsimmons, 1999: 219)

Whilst this may be true of some teachers, surely the majority write notes and cards; emails and lists; reports and plans, and some may keep diaries or write poetry. Perhaps such writing is not often shared with children however demonstrating that adults too are writers, who use

writing for their own reasons and who stretch their voices as they seek to create and communicate meaning. However, through the experience of writing for themselves in safe supported environments, teachers can learn about the complex process of writing from the inside out. Through becoming personally involved, thinking and feeling their way forwards as writers they can gain insight into practices which help them develop both as teachers and as writers.

### **Documenting the journey**

During the last eight months of a research and development project ‘We’re Writers’ (Grainger et al., 2002; 2005) the reflective writing journeys of the fourteen teacher members of the project focus group (PFG) were documented. This two year research project with eight primary schools in southern England sought to establish what teachers need to know, understand and do in order to develop creativity in writing and also explored the nature of voice and verve in writing. In the later stages of the project, the teachers were given opportunities both to write together in the group and alongside their young learners in class. In addition to the teachers in the ‘We’re Writers’ project, two other groups of teachers and one group of student teachers also took part in monthly writing workshops at this time (total 45). Questionnaires and interviews were undertaken, observations and field notes were made and the teachers/students’ writing and reflective commentaries were collected.

The workshops provided regular opportunities for free choice writing; writing in role as part of a drama session and structured writing, when the form and content were prescribed. In these sessions, the teachers and the tutor/s took time to write and consider the experience. Follow up interviews were also undertaken with the PFG, who kept journals, reflecting upon writing alongside the children. The findings shared in this article are drawn from an analysis of the total data set of the four groups who worked separately. Through this work the teachers

began to see writing more clearly, viewing it anew through their own experience as writers, they considered the surprises and understandings which emerged and the consequences for their classrooms. The issues which arose from writing and reflection included: the anxiety caused by writing and the related tension which existed between public and private writing; the security of the writing environment; the value of authenticity in modelling writing; the importance of re-reading writing at the point of composition; the significance of autonomy and the potency of drama and writing as a generative and reflective tool.

### **The tension between private and public writing**

Initially, the teachers lacked confidence as writers; many voiced the view that they had not 'written anything' since school and were dreading the workshops. In the initial questionnaire, 80% expressed concern and discomfort about writing alongside their peers, perhaps because they were more overtly than usual positioned as learners and felt vulnerable about this role shift in the domain of writing. In their various sessions the groups had taken part in drama, storytelling and response to literature activities as part of the extended process of composition and shared a growing ease and assurance in these areas. But when it came to committing words to paper, levels of anxiety increased markedly and they were frequently self - derogatory, e.g. *"Why am I so hopeless at this?"*, *"I have always been awful at writing"*, *"Help! I'm an awful speller"*, *"I never understand instructions, I feel thoroughly thick when I'm asked/told to write"*. A distinct fear of comparison was also in evidence, *"I bet everyone else will have better ideas"*, *"It'll be embarrassing if we have to share, mine will be the worst"*, *"I hope we don't have to read it out, everyone else's will be better than mine,"* *"My fear of being shown up makes me feel rebellious- perhaps my boys feel like this too"* This initial focus on the product and their concern with others' value judgements inhibited their preparedness to write, despite the fact that these teachers write for a variety of purposes every

day. The questionnaire indicated that those with the lowest levels of self-esteem as writers undertook much less expressive writing than their more confident peers and wrote predominantly for functional purposes. These teachers found little time to engage in 'recreational writing' as McClay (1998) describes writing that is done for the personal satisfaction of the writer. Negative school experiences also influenced their depressing self-evaluations; *“My writing was never read as an example in school not ever. I hated writing then and I hate it now, I am just no good at it”*, *“I was always awful at writing; I never had any ideas for stories”*, *“I always got low grades at school, so writing evokes a sense of inferiority in me; I’ve never been any good at it”*.

The difficulties of engaging in writing and its connection to a sense of self inhibited these adults and in the early workshops, despite re-assurance that they could choose whether to share their work, one teacher regularly tore up her work in order to ensure her privacy. This fear of failure and possible exposure raised issues of security, ownership and trust in writing. When the workshops began, most members of the groups had reasonably strong professional relationships with one another, but they still found it difficult to share their personal writing and observed that they were unused to engaging in writing on the expressive end of the continuum (Britton, 1993). Despite the supportive space, their growing friendships and pedagogic expertise, these professionals found it difficult to speak about their writing and risky to share their writing selves and identities; they were often confronted with their own subjectivity in the company of others. Many also appeared to feel unsure how to respond appropriately to each other’s work, one fairly typical comment was *“I don’t know what to say, I mean I don’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings and after all it’s her writing”*. Over time however, the groups grew in confidence, trust was built and security increased. Tracey expressed her perception of this journey by observing, *“I didn’t really make much effort in*

*our early workshops, I treated the whole thing flippantly and distanced myself from it. Once I realised you weren't going to judge our work or make it public, then I felt safer and let myself get involved in my writing- I began to write for myself".* In fact after several weeks of not sharing her work and avoiding becoming involved, Tracey unexpectedly read her work aloud to the group and voiced pride in her poem on pottery, *"It says what I want it to- it's kind of caught the feeling I was after"*.

### **Pottery**

*A pot*

*Smooth, shiny,*

*Thrown, stroked*

*And shaped as thought*

*A vessel for my therapy.*

The group appeared surprised that Tracey attended weekly pottery classes, commented on the fact that she'd chosen to reveal this personal hobby through her writing and debated whether children were given sufficient time to write about their own individual interests in school. Both the sense of the self in writing and the power and influence of the evaluative judgements of others were discussed at length and as a consequence the different groups decided children's emotional security and right to privacy needed to be re-considered in the classroom. Subsequently, many worked to ensure children's ownership of their writing journals was properly respected (Graham and Johnson, 2003), encouraging youngsters to adopt the practice of paper-clipping private pages together and honouring individual's decisions not to share their writing.

This unsettling tension between private and public writing also highlighted the need to create a very secure writing environment in school. The teachers worked to achieve this in a variety

of ways: through open class discussions on the subject, through reducing the practice of grading or levelling work, through increasing collaborative writing opportunities and in particular through establishing a more collegial working atmosphere. In class, many of these professionals began to put their own work on the overhead projector and sought advice and feedback from the children, reflecting a real concern to enter a genuine dialogue. A few however found this too challenging and asserted their privacy over personal writing undertaken in class.

In their own workshops, the teachers frequently chose to write together and came to appreciate the conversational context and mutual support which such writing engendered e.g. *“I liked it best when we wrote collaboratively”* and *“ I was glad we just shared in pairs or small groups, gradually I felt less threatened and have come to realise the value of others’ comments”* and *“Until we did it ourselves I never knew how valuable writing together is-for me it was like a breakthrough- I felt more supported and less judged“*, *“ When we wrote together we achieved so much more and so can the kids”*. As a consequence, more collaborative small group or paired writing was planned in class and response partners were established for the first time in many classrooms. Reflection time, a trusting ethos and conversations of a constructive yet evaluative nature, were gradually recognised as crucial in the growing assurance of writers, regardless of age or experience.

### **Authentically modelling writing**

The questionnaire indicated that the majority of the teachers/students rarely modelled writing spontaneously in front of the children. Some assiduously prepared such writing at home and pretended to be thinking out-loud as they wrote, whilst others collected their thoughts and wrote perhaps an opening paragraph prior to composing ‘authentically’ in school. This



practice of preparing writing at home was particularly marked with the less confident teachers of writing, who expressed low self esteem as writers, and who were understandably concerned about their ability to model specific literary features spontaneously and publically. Poetry was perceived as the hardest form of writing to model and was virtually always pre-written by teachers of 9-11 year olds, reflecting a degree of insecurity and uncertainty which Luce-Kapler et al. (2001) also found with Initial Teacher Education (ITE) students. The teachers felt most at ease in modelling non-fiction writing, which they perceived was due to their knowledge of the features of such texts. This understanding gave them the security and confidence to verbalise the process, which is arguably more complex in poetry and narrative writing. As adults, many clearly felt the need to incubate and form their own ideas prior to writing, but as teachers they were not necessarily offering novice writers extended opportunities of this nature. This inconsistency and the value of incubating ideas was discussed at length.

The teachers agreed that young learners deserve to be apprenticed to real writers, who genuinely think through the process as they write and tentatively explore ways of conveying their emerging argument or narrative. Teachers need to demonstrate to children that writing is a problem solving activity (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987), a process of thinking and evaluating that involves an internal dialogue. As artists they should 'model the creative process for pupils with all the attendant risk taking this involves' (HMI, 2003:8) and reveal the challenges involved as writers struggle to express the inexpressible. Gradually, as their experience of writing at their own level and their assurance grew, the adult writers in the groups began to consider their ideas, or lack of them, more explicitly in front of their classes and some felt more able to talk about their blank spots, false starts and uncertainties. As they did so they demonstrated the important principle of writing to learn and showed children how

meaning evolves and understanding develops as authors exercise choices and write their way forwards.

### **Re-reading at the point of composition**

When the teachers wrote, and shifted ideas around within their emerging texts, juxtaposing points and inserting new ones, they became aware that they were constantly reading back and forth through their writing. Calkins (1986:20) suggests that the growing edge of writing is this reflective interaction between the writer and the developing text, and Flower and Hayes (1984) too have shown that when writers compose on paper they review their work within the sentence. Many of the teachers referred to this process which is insightfully described by Murray.

‘The self speaks, the other self listens and responds. The self proposes, the other self considers. The self makes, the other self evaluates. The two selves collaborate: a problem is spotted, discussed, defined; solutions are proposed, rejected, suggested, attempted, tested, discarded, accepted’.

(Murray, 1982:165)

Their comments included, *I never realised how central re-reading is in shaping my writing- It’s automatic really, but I never noticed it before*, *“I need to re-read as I write- to feel where my voice is going”* and *“I find re-reading a vital strategy, not just for drafting, but in order to hear my own voice and reinforce my angle”*. Young writers deserve to be introduced to this vital interaction and to be taught to re-read and sub-vocalise as they compose, since such monitoring allows them to hear the tunes and rhythms of their work and increases their syntactic awareness. The teachers found that repeated re-reading helped them direct and re-

direct their focus, as well as underline the meanings they were trying to convey, it also enabled them to become alert to their inner voices evoking thoughts and feelings. As they wrote regularly and reflexively at their own level, many asked themselves questions, which included:

- What am I trying to say?
- How does it sound?
- Why did I choose...?
- What do I want to say/do next?
- How could I say that?
- What will my reader be thinking/ feeling as they read this?

In this way, they became writers then readers and writers again, as they shuttled back and forth inside the compositional process, editing, reshaping and reflecting upon the sounds, tunes and visuals of their words and meaning. Many challenged themselves to model this compelling dialogic process in the classroom, shifting from one stance to another and spontaneously voicing out loud their ‘possibility thinking’ (Craft, 2000). They began to declare their doubts and share their questioning and overtly reflective stance, demonstrating that re-reading writing and listening to one’s voice is a critical ongoing skill, not one to be left to the end of the process. The teachers also observed that in learning to listen to their own voices they got a feel for the potency of their writing and developed a more critical and self-evaluative ear. Re-reading writing at the point of production can increase an author’s conscious control over the process and may help to avoid the piece spiralling out of control. In profiling this practice in school, many of these professionals also began to re-read the children’s drafts back to them, since, as Barrs and Cork (2001) have shown, this can reveal the pattern and texture of the writing and heighten the learners’ awareness of their meanings as they evolve.

### **Autonomy and involvement**

In a third of the writing workshops, the content and the genre of the writing undertaken was imposed, whilst in the remaining sessions the teachers' exercised their own choices. Their commentaries, both on individual pieces of writing and on the process of writing, consistently raised the issue of choice and autonomy; most found limitations inhibiting and infuriating. The children in the 'We're Writers' project had also expressed strong views about autonomy in writing, particularly those aged 7 – 11 years (Grainger et al., 2003), but it wasn't until their teachers were involved themselves as writers, some eighteen months later, that this desire for agency and personal choice was experienced first-hand. As one teacher commented "*the supported choice- but freedom to do as I wanted was critical for me – even now I don't give enough choice*". Myhill (2001) has observed that writing involves both crafting and creating; the latter particularly appealed to these teachers who valued their independence and imaginative freedom. They appreciated the sense of personal satisfaction which their volition and agency as authors appeared to provide.

Their personal involvement in writing was evident in the many opportunities the teachers seized to reflect upon themselves, their families and friends. For example, after an animated sharing of the picture book *Clarice Bean that's Me* by Lauren Child, one teacher, Angela, decided to make a similar book about her husband. '*If you'd said we had to write one I wouldn't have wanted to, but given the chance to do my own thing, I found I was free and somehow more determined*'. The space to shape her own writing made a marked impact on this professional, who invested considerable time and energy in producing *My Bob's a Heart-Throb*. It was a labour of love with ironic double page spreads about Bob's favourite hobbies and habits, his dreams and desires, it was also an opportunity to reflect upon and celebrate 36

years of marriage. Influenced by the post-modern style of Lauren Child, the book was crammed with comical and satirical asides, diagrams, visuals and photo-montage effects. Understandably Angela's class were impressed and several created their own autobiographical or biographical texts e.g. *Did my Grandad go to War? says Clarice Bean*. Most were deliciously applied to real life and hilariously told in words and images.

In re-reading their writing and reflecting upon the workshops, many of the teachers observed that the writing prompts, the discursive atmosphere and the sense of collegiality in the sessions enabled them to make connections, revisit memories and reflect upon their lives. Several noted that they often chose first-person writing as they found this more satisfying and that through these opportunities they were becoming more aware of the relationship between writing and their sense of self and identity. For some, the sessions appeared to represent an opportunity to take time out of the rush of the curriculum and of life, and became a personal space, in which they could pause, reflect, question, consider and connect. The heart of writing, Moffett (1968) claims, beats deep within the subjective inner life of the writer and in a manner similar to their children, some of the teachers felt they had achieved most in their writing when they were doing something for and of themselves, something which made dynamic sense of their own lives.

*"I don't think much of what I wrote today, but that doesn't matter – what does is that it has reminded me of my dad – his love of walnut whips and his love of me".*

*" I feel I've met myself again through these writing sessions, I hadn't realised writing was so much about oneself, even when I'm writing in role I can see myself, my life, my views in the writing".*

*“I wrote all these for myself really – that was my choice I guess, although an unconscious one. The best ones are when I was retelling my life experiences. I found them most satisfying – It’s like re-reading my life. Thank you”.*

Britton (1982:21) suggests that ‘the artist’s interpretation of experience is concrete; sensuous, emotional and intellectual. Yet it is not mere re-enactment either - it is a work of the creative imagination’. This was borne out in much of the writing in which the teachers found their outer voices through choosing to converse with their inner voices. They appeared to be listening to themselves, beginning to hear what they had to say and valuing the process of reflective introspection and connection.

### **Writing in-role**

Many of the teachers noted that the drama and writing sessions contributed markedly to the quality and fluency of their work and when invited to identify the piece of their writing which showed the most voice and verve, the majority selected one written during drama. Several described this writing as ‘flowing onto paper’. It seemed that in hearing their own and others’ voices in the drama and experiencing a range of ideas, their writing began to take shape in both form and content, and their imaginative involvement provided a period of active contemplation and percolation in which their feelings came to the fore. *“When I was in character, it just flowed onto paper. I couldn’t be wrong, it was what I felt, what I believed”*, *“Putting myself in someone else’s shoes and experiencing their dilemma really helped me form what I wanted to say.”* In role, the teachers developed their ideas and unlocked their potential, often becoming so engaged that the transition to writing appeared to be relatively effortless. Their writing during drama was frequently undertaken in complete silence and a marked stillness descended, prompting perhaps a more focused mental engagement on the writing itself. The teachers did appear to write in a ‘state of flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002),

influenced by the intensity and engagement of the drama and commented for example, “*I was able to experience the place- it became present/not past – real not imagined*”, “*My anger was real, I would not stand for this injustice - I wrote from the heart*” . The quietness and focus of their in- role writing suggested that the teachers were continuing to live through the imagined experience and they perceived this contributed markedly to their writing. An extract from a drama session indicates the potency of this ideational and reflective tool; Sarah, writing in role as the grandmother in the Chippewyan legend ‘Ladder to the Sky’ records her feelings on the night her grandson has departed to join the god Manitou.

*You’ve gone and I’m left alone again. What hurts the most is that you chose to leave. Chose to leave me in this circle of conformity in which no one asks questions and everyone accepts the status quo. We are sealed in our silence and you were our only hope, my only hope... Why didn’t you look back-pay your last respects- meet my eye? How can you disregard your past so? Don’t you care? As I crouch beside the sacred vine, with the worry of age and the weight of uncertainty entwining me- never before have I been so tempted- why should we keep our vows, what has Manitou ever done for us? He cannot be trusted. Faith is slipping from me, like a veil slips from a bride’s face on her wedding day. Yet is not with joy the cloth descends, but with agony and anguish, Manitou has deserted me and in cruel irony has taken you. Darkness descends.*

Such empathetic writing in-role emerged from the engagement and reflection of the drama and often involved the dual processes of identification and transformation. There are perhaps parallels here with the ‘closeness and distance – the pushing forward and pulling back, creation and criticism’ that writing involves (Calkins, 1991:91). In drama, the teachers were operating as artists, generating and considering ideas through participating in imagined

worlds. Their involvement in these experiences enabled their thoughts to surge forwards and often produced passion in their prose and evoked connections and reflections. As one noted, *“I felt like the old woman and needed to write it all down quickly before the feelings went away. As I wrote, her pain seemed to ebb away. I suppose I was sharing her loss and remembering mine”*. The act of composition, like any generative process involves preparedness to take risks and to order and shape one’s thinking; drama provided opportunities for both. The consequences for the classroom were clear, and the teachers worked to provide more time for the children to write in-role, enabling them to inhabit and explore narratives and develop empathy through role adoption and emotive engagement. It became evident that such deep insider involvement; ‘innerstanding’ as Heathcote and Bolton (1995) describe it, can enrich writing for all learners. The teachers also began to examine further the relationship between particular drama conventions and writing genres and sought to bridge more closely the gap between the oral and the written (Grainger, 2001a; 2001b; 2003). In doing so they offered children extended opportunities for oral rehearsal and increased incubation time prior to writing.

## **Conclusion**

As writers learning together, these professionals were involved in taking risks, interpreting experience, making connections, and reflecting upon their insights as well as examining the consequences for classroom practice. The opportunity to take part in the extended process of composition and to consider the nature and challenge of writing prompted several of the teachers to start their own personal writing journals in school, two started diaries, one began to write her own poetry again and many seized the chance to write in class alongside their younger learners. In the final questionnaire and through discussion, most voiced the view that they found writing less threatening now and rather more satisfying. Some even took



considerable pleasure in it and many indicated that they were more aware of the close relationship between writing, reflection and identity. These teachers had begun to perceive writing as a means of creating and expressing meaning both in their own lives and the lives of the children. Many moved from being writing instructors in the classroom to informed facilitators and fellow writers and as they did so their understanding of the art of writing developed. The reflexive and emergent nature of writing was experienced first hand and they perceived their sensitivity to the children's journeys as writers also increased. Whilst there will always be tensions around the issue of creating 'a balance in personal and professional lives, particularly with regard to finding time to read and write' (McClay,1998:185), these teachers' journeys suggest that seeking such a balance in relation to literacy has considerable learning potential for all involved. Teachers of writing deserve time to think further about the processes involved in finding ideas, in expressing thoughts and in composing, and should surely be offered opportunities to extend their own experience as writers of both fiction and non-fiction through Initial Teacher Education and Continuing Professional Development. In this way, teachers can learn more about themselves, about writing and about the fascinating art of teaching writing.

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