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## Motivating children to write with purpose and passion

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How to cite:

Cremin, T (2010). Motivating children to write with purpose and passion. In: Goodwin, P ed. The Literate Classroom (3rd ed.). Abingdon: Routledge.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© Not known

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415584074/>

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Cremin, T. (2010) *Motivating Children to Write with Purpose and Pleasure* in P. Goodwin (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) (ed.) *The Literate Classroom* London: Routledge

## ORO

### Introduction

Teaching writing is a balancing act; real time and space need to be created for developing children's knowledge about language as well as their ability to use and apply this knowledge creatively and effectively. The balance between process and product also need to be considered and the relevance, purpose and pleasure in writing highlighted, so that young learners experience writing as meaningful and see themselves and their teachers as writers with something to say and the means to communicate it.

Too often in school, children 'learn to write for the circular purpose of learning to write' (Frater 2004) and find little personal purpose or value in it. If writing is reduced to a series of formulae to be followed and a toolkit approach to the knowledge and skills required is adopted, then the act of writing is divorced from the writer and disinterest and disaffection are likely to develop (Packwood and Messenheimer 2003). As two nine-year-olds somewhat typically commented in one study, 'I hate being told what to do and how to do it', 'I don't like writing, it's nothing to do with me' (Grainger *et al.* 2003). This chapter focuses on motivating young writers, helping them find pleasure in writing as they use it for their own purposes and communicate with voice and verve. A creative approach to teaching literacy has been found to be highly motivating and is argued for here, this includes several essential features which enable teachers to make informed decisions, both at the level of planning and in the moment-to-moment interactions in the classroom. The eight elements of creative literacy practice include:

1. profiling meaning and purpose,
2. foregrounding potent affectively engaging texts,
3. fostering play and engagement,
4. harnessing curiosity and profiling agency,
5. encouraging collaboration and making connections,
6. integrating reflection, review, feedback and celebration
7. taking time to travel and explore
8. ensuring the creative involvement of the teacher. (Cremin 2009:5)

These are explored in this chapter with reference to motivating writers, in particular the need to take time within an extended model of composition, and the power of texts and creative contexts which tempt young writers to play and engage are profiled, as well as the importance of teaching skills in meaningful contexts and the creative involvement of teachers as writers. The significance of offering children choice and extending their agency as authors is also explored.

### Taking time in the extended process of composition

Writing takes time and involves experience, reflection and evaluation, so the process of composition needs to be an extended one, encompassing considerable discussion and exploration as young writers play their way thoughtfully forwards. Creative opportunities enable children to try out possibilities and reflect upon what it is that they are trying to say, although their ideas will be further developed and shaped when they actually write them down. In a four week unit on traditional tales for example, extended periods of storytelling, dramatic investigation and considerable focused reading, writing, sharing and discussing are likely to be undertaken. Explicit teaching of textual features will also be woven into this time, although some learning about folk and fairy tales will develop through immersion in the genre in shared, guided and independent reading, reading aloud and through the teacher and the children telling oral stories. Children can learn a great deal about story structure, narrative action, the language of characterisation and the examination of themes through their active engagement as storytellers and story listeners (Grainger, 2005). Building in a storytelling afternoon when children share their chosen and well rehearsed tales with other classes and perhaps sell a CD of these or an accompanying anthology of other tales can help provide both purpose and context in which they will shape and polish their story writing skills.

These long-term unit aims need to be shared from the outset and consciously travelled towards, but the route actually taken will depend on the children's interests, responses, questions and needs. The planned writing opportunities will be imaginatively framed in support of the long-term goals, but others will be seized as they surface and related objectives will be explored in context. To support their storytelling, children may, for example, represent narrative structure in the form of story maps, mountains, seeds or hands (Grainger *et al.* 2004) and move through imitation towards innovation and re-creation. Delighting in the oral opportunity to entertain and engage others as the tellers of tales, they will come to lean on the structure, characters and language of stories they have heard and told, as six-year-old Gary's taped tale indicates...

*Once upon a time there lived a king, a queen and a prince. The king and queen had something to tell the prince and so that night he went looking for something and he'd forgotten what he went looking for but then he finally remembered. So he went looking for a girl and there was this lovely pretty house covered in pink paint and blue little bits of blue and then he knocked on the door and he said would you like to come for dinner and the girl said yes but she was expecting somebody else and this was their first date when she thought it was him so they went round to the house and they had chips, sausages and beans and the princess says I will come round on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday so this day was Saturday and the prince went round to the ring shop and he spented and he got his money out and he said he had ten pounds and there was only a ring for nine pounds so he bought the ring and that night he said he had a surprise for the girl in the living room when she came round and he went down on both knees and said will you marry me and the girl had half an hour of thinking about it and then she came into the living room and said yes and the king and queen organised a great wedding and they both lived happily ever after but there was one row in the end and then they lived happily ever after until they died.*

The extended process of composition allows time for children such as Gary to engage fully with a range of motivating activities which lead towards purposeful writing, and enables us as their teachers to lead by framing and inspiring, but also by following their interests and sensitively shaping the unfolding exploration with them.

### **Potent texts to lean on and learn from**

As reading and writing are closely related, it is essential that we help children lean on literature, both oral and written, to enrich their storehouse of possibilities. The kinds of literary texts that are most supportive to children as writers at KS2 are, according to Barrs and Cork (2001), traditional tales, stories containing 'poeticised speech' and emotionally powerful texts. Younger writers are also drawn in through affective engagement with powerful literature, with film, television and the lyrics of popular music and these are potent tools for motivating and engaging young writers. When children's personal responses are honoured and connections are made with the texts of popular culture and their current interests, their involvement and pleasure in learning and writing increases. Investigating texts is an integral part of the extended process of composition and can occur in a multitude of ways, alongside teaching about language forms and features. However, such focused teaching of reading and writing, despite its emphasis on literary devices, should not be at the expense of the meaning or purpose of the text, it should enable children to apply new knowledge and skills to their own writing, as the Teaching Reading and Writing Links Project showed (Corden 2003). The breadth and variety of textual forms that exist represent a rich resource that children can lean on and learn from, and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century many of these will be multimodal texts, so visual approaches to teaching writing are also needed (for ideas see Bearne and Wolstencroft 2007). As teachers we need to steep children in exciting multimodal texts and develop creative contexts in which their thoughts and responses can be represented in diverse ways.

### **Creative contexts to generate ideas**

Inviting children to take part in creative contexts in order to generate ideas, through talking, drama and exploration of different media helps shape their ongoing and later writing. As they play with the possibilities of texts they know through the extended process of composition, they may create and craft visually, orally, physically and/or in written form (see Cremin 2009). Their multimodal explorations may, for example, involve them in discussing issues, hotseating characters, playing with puppets, constructing story worlds with toys and objects, interviewing, dancing, drama, drawing, making films and music and much more besides. In such contexts, the desire to mean, to make and to write is fostered and the learners are actively involved in shaping their understanding. The play scripts, PowerPoint presentations or persuasive arguments recorded as documentary extracts eventually produced will have emerged through this active process of reading, exploring, creating, generating and representing texts.

Stepping inside texts imaginatively fosters children's creative capacity as writers,

since writing in role has increased authenticity and a sense of audience (Grainger 2004; Cremin 2006). For example, during a drama based around *Little Wolf's Book of Badness* by Ian Whybrow, Nathan's teacher seized the moment to write and he wrote in role as Little Wolf to his parents back home (see Figure 8.1). In his letter he reflects upon the narrative that the class had improvised, refers to the missing whisky bottle and builds upon the interior monologue that he had voiced within the drama. Through his words and images Nathan evokes a rich sense of Little Wolf's humorous stance and playful demeanour. The drama had been a kind of oral rehearsal for writing that helped shape his letter, prompting his involvement and interest. He read it aloud with pride and passion, taking up Little Wolf's role again as he did so. Research indicates that in improvisational classroom drama, when tension, emotional engagement and a sense of perspective gained through role adoption are combined, children's writing in role is more detailed, emotive and empathetic, and more effectively captures the readers' interest (Cremin *et al.* 2006).

Children deserve support in developing their ideas and this requires considerably more than a brief conversation with their partner prior to writing. Through imaginatively using talk during the extended process of composition, they are able to voice their views and express their feelings, trying out, absorbing and transforming others' voices, as they begin to trust and stretch their own. The use of drama, storytelling and other interactive activities helps them take risks with ideas, words and images. In such contexts they are affectively and intellectually involved which encourages openness to learning, so that the move into writing is more meaningful and is experienced as a seamless shift. Such writing will not be perceived as a separate task to be undertaken, but as an extension of the engaging enterprise in which they are involved. Collaborative writing is also a rich and underused activity in schools, yet research suggests it can enrich children's creativity and commitment (Vass, 2004). Inhabiting creative contexts in the extended compositional process, children can take the time to explore themes and issues, generating ideas as well as following through a train of thought, and pursuing and extending their ideas in action as well as through reflection and critique as they work on their writing to capture and sustain the reader's interest.

### **Explicit teaching of skills in context**

During a unit of work which involves playful and imaginative contexts, children may use writing to make notes, label diagrams, tell tales, write reports and reflect upon both lived and imagined experience. Their writing, based on potent texts and developed through inspiring contexts, also needs to pay attention to technical skills and employ their knowledge about language. Such knowledge must be taught for 'creativity and knowledge are two sides of the same psychological coin, not opposing forces' (Boden 2001: 102). However, skills transfer more easily if they are embedded in a meaningful framework and are employed for real outcomes and purposes. For example, in role playing the heated discussion between Tim and his dad in Jaqueline Wilson's *Cliffhanger*, ideas about how dad might persuade his timid son to go on an adventure holiday can be improvised in action. Tim's own defensive position can also be created. After some generative drama time, the substantive content of the persuasive

argument could be recorded in shared writing, and the teacher could choose to examine the use and placement of speech verbs, speech marks, adverbs to describe intonation and manner, speech presentation, and so on.

Such teaching is contextualised and can be applied to the children's own writing as they work in pairs to resolve the argument on paper. Research into effective teachers of literacy (Wray *et al.* 2002) shows that the explicit teaching of word, sentence and text level features is a regular part of the practice of these professionals, who set such instruction in contexts which are meaningful to the children. They also carefully explain the purpose of these features and use whole texts, not de-contextualised extracts, to teach writing. As teachers we need to develop children's knowledge about genres of writing and we will need to set targets which relate to punctuation and spelling for example, but these also need to be balanced by targets which focus on making an impact upon the reader, and writing to persuade, to amuse or to shock for example, so that children are recognised as authors, communicators and meaning makers (for more examples see Cremin 2009).

### **Offering increased choice and agency to writers**

To develop children's independence as writers and motivate them, choice needs to be built into writing opportunities, encouraging them to make decisions about the purpose, form, structure and audience of their writing. Children frequently express a desire for more autonomy in writing and value opportunities when they can exert agency over the process (Grainger *et al.* 2003; Myhill 2005). If given the choice, they often use writing to reflect upon subjects that have relevance and interest to them, making links with popular culture and their inner affective existences. Through writing regularly about what matters to them, children experience the potential of writing more fully and invest more of themselves in the process. For example, in one school a group of ten- and eleven-year-old boys found pleasure and purpose in writing through collaboratively publishing their own magazine *Bonkerz*. The ten issues contained jokes and comic strips, historical information and recipes, a pets' corner, quizzes about *The Simpsons*, diary entries, word searches, and so forth, all created by the *Bonkerz* crew in their own time at home and at school. Their commitment to this publication, which they sold in aid of charity was remarkable, through it they found a way to explore their diverse strengths and identities (see Figure 8.2).

Many teachers offer choice through writing journals. In these, children often choose to write about their lives, their concerns and interests, fads and fashions, experience and expertise, revealing something of themselves in the process. If they are able to personalise these, take them home and are allowed to retain the right to share their work if they choose, these serve to motivate and interest children in writing (Graham and Johnson 2003). However initially, teachers may need to help children decide the content and form, and offer them chance to share their work in the classroom community of writers. As they write for and of themselves on subjects about which they are knowledgeable, children find their voices, that sense of their uniqueness as a writer (Grainger *et al.* 2005). Choice can be built into other literacy work too, when, for example, the use of music to evoke mood and character is being examined in *Finding Nemo*. A list of possible written forms such as a letter from Marlin or a poem about Nemo can be created

with the class and offered as options.

Teachers also need to ensure there is sufficient physical space for children to converse, improvise, explore and negotiate meanings and possibilities together. Resources of various kinds may include props, puppets, gel pens, percussion instruments and drawing materials. Role play areas, message boards, home writing displays, a writing table, digital cameras and computers can also be invaluable when they are working independently. Resources and creative contexts provide conceptual space for young writers to play their way forwards. In such open environments of possibility, there is space to make choices, take the initiative and try different ways of conveying one's emerging message.

### **Teachers' creative involvement as writers**

In recent years there has been increased interest in the motivating power of teachers demonstrating that they are writers who use the written word on page and screen to communicate, organise, reflect and express themselves (Andrews, 2008; Cremin 2006; Yeo, 2007). In modelling the reflective process of writing and talking out loud as they compose in front of the class, as well as through writing alongside children in independent writing contexts, teachers demonstrate they are writers and share the challenges and pleasures in being a writer. In such contexts, they can talk about the process and reflect upon the experience - the pleasures and difficulties, their lack of motivation or eagerness to write- and be prompted to make connections to the children's own experiences. Teachers positioned as writers are arguably better placed to motivate young writers. Their involvement in the process may enable them, as studies have shown to recognise the significance of ownership and privacy in writing (Grainger 2005), the uncertainty and discomfort involved (Cremin 2006), and the risks involved in sharing one's writing.

When writing publicly and authentically in front of children teachers can and should seek to demonstrate their authorial agency, verbalising their intentions for the piece of writing, and their chosen form, purpose and audience. They may as they compose in shared writing contexts, also invite children to make suggestions and engage in joint composition of the text, its construction and language, and may use their own work to model the complex, non-linear processes of planning, drafting, editing and proofreading one's work. If teachers share their writing and ask the class to comment on its strengths as well as suggest possible ways forward, this helps the children see their teachers as writers and can help to build mutual respect and increased empathy in the classroom community of writers. As writers in the classroom, teachers are likely to have their own writer's journal and, in undertaking some of the same work as the children, writing their own recounts or short stories for example, will gain increased insight into the complexity of the tasks they set. Teachers who write alongside their pupils, both in demonstration writing and in independent writing, find that they gain considerable insight into the writing process and understand more fully the demands of writing in school; this often challenges such teachers to construct more creatively engaging contexts and to offer more choice (Grainger 2005).

It is not enough however for teachers simply to engage as writers at the point of

composition, we also need to take a full part in the creative contexts which are a central part of the extended process of writing. Teachers can develop their own ideas for writing through telling tales or taking up roles in drama for example, and can then show children that they also lean on oral and written texts, their lives and film and multimedia resources. They can also support children's capacity to reflect upon and evaluate their writing, seeking to make more impact on the reader or persuade their intended audience of their viewpoint through using their own writing as an artefact for examination as well as working as a genuine response partner with learners.

## **Conclusion**

As teachers, if we adopt a flexible yet informed frameset, we can offer engaging invitations to learn about writing through developing rich creative contexts in which writing is a natural and necessary response. We can find inspirational and involving ways forward that build on children's interests, capture their imaginations and energise their emotions so that a desire to write is developed and their voices are activated through deep creative engagement and considered reflection.

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