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Living the Craft of Writing

We're off! Over the last three weekends we've welcomed over 40 teachers to Lumb Bank in Yorkshire, Ted Hughes' beautiful home with Sylvia Plath owned by Arvon. The project, which is a partnership between Arvon, the Open University, and the University of Exeter is exploring how the opportunity for teachers to work with professional writers might change their understanding of being a writer, how they teach writing, and improve both children's outcomes and attitudes to writing. The project, (which is funded by EEF and the RSA as part of the Learning About Culture fund), is a randomised control trial with a comparison group of Year 5 teachers who are not involved in the intervention. The work is being evaluated by University College London and the Behavioural Insights Team for EEF/RSA.

What a start! Whilst many of the teachers were initially tentative about writing and sharing their work, supported by their tutors Steve Voake and Alicia Stubberfield, they soon settled to spin words onto the page, to generate possibilities, and to open windows on their own worlds and others. The 'teachers as writers' residencies have provided sustained space for writing workshops, one-to-one tutorials with the tutors, and other time and space to write as well as reflect on the classroom consequences.

Rich opportunities for 'taking your pen for a walk' have been seized with enthusiasm by the teachers, alongside close attention to other aspects of the craft, including for example aspects of text level choices such as 'show not tell', and explorations of viewpoint, as well as language level choices such as 'making the abstract concrete' and focusing on being concise. Much attention has also been given to the messy and iterative process of writing, the potency of pre-writing and some features of the reader-writer relationship such as 'affecting the reader' and 'reader-writer interaction'.

In the three rapidly forming writers' communities, increasingly conscious of the influence of reading on writing, teachers have read aloud their own work and the work of published writers (adults and children's). They have also committed to some summer reading of children's literature so that these 'books in common' can be revisited in the autumn CPD days and attention to each writer's craft examined more closely. These include for example:

Pax -Sara Pennypacker

Sky Song – Abi Elphinstone

King of the Sky- Nicola Davies and Laura Carlin

Arthur: the Seeing Stone – Kevin Crossley-Holland

The Autumn CPD days will focus on supporting practitioners as they journey from Arvon to the classroom, will examine research evidence, and unfold the 'Craft of Writing Framework' (developed through analysis of the professional writers' interviews and tutorials in the previous Arvon, OU, Exeter collaboration: 'Teachers as Writers'). There will also be another set of residential weekends in January, focused more on revision and feedback, and a Spring CPD day with visits to schools in-between and resource support on the project website.

This week as the last residential group return to their classrooms there is a super opportunity to participate in National Writing Day initiatives and the morning's free-write led by Dean Attar at 9am (Wednesday 27th June). Engagingly, this will be focused on responses to the line 'I feel most free when...'. by Alongside the commitment to explore different starting points for writing, use these as 'seeds' for children to work on more developed pieces, and share writing in class, the teachers are also planning to write alongside their classes. They too will no doubt be exploring when they feel most free.... These strands comprise part of the next steps for project teachers who will be exploring the teaching of writing from within the process as writers themselves as well as teachers of writing.

We look forward to meeting the three groups in Manchester and Leeds at the CPD days and supporting the teachers on their journeys, and broadening their subject knowledge and practice in order to motivate young writers and improve children's writing outcomes. Do follow this monthly blog as we seek to enrich our collective professional understanding of the craft of writing.