Writers’ identities matter: influenced by personal histories and experiences, our identities as writers influence the way in which we approach writing and are likely to influence our teaching of writing. Teachers’ writing identities deserve more recognition and development in schooling. This PETAA paper, drawing upon research in this area, seeks to enable teachers to reflect upon themselves as writers outside the school context, and explores multiple ways in which teachers can model being a writer in the classroom. It provides some examples and illustrations of the benefits and challenges involved in teachers’ positioning themselves as writers in the classroom.

Teachers as writers: research in the field
It has long been maintained that teachers need be able to write and should position themselves as writers, undertaking the same tasks as their students. The notion that teachers should be writers emerged in Emig’s (1971) early work and was later built upon by Graves (1983), who asserted that teaching writing requires the control of the inseparable crafts of teaching and writing. Whilst his work has been critiqued for being anecdotal and unsystematic (Smagorinsky, 1987), it prompted practitioners to use their compositions as teaching tools and sowed the seeds of a number of related studies. Indeed, Yeo (2007), examining Canadian teachers’ perspectives, claims that those who write in their personal lives develop their writing identities and transmit the benefits of such practice in their teaching of writing. International evidence though suggests a worrying number of pre-service teachers view writing as difficult and potentially exposing; they express concerns about teaching writing and tend to make negative judgements about their expertise as writers (Peel, 1995; Domaille and Edwards, 2006; Gallavan et al. 2007; Luce-Kapler et al. 2001). In one study the majority of trainees reported not writing outside class and lacked confidence as writers (Morgan 2010); it is argued this related to their low self-esteem, negative self-labelling and poor experiences in schooling. Other studies affirm this, suggesting teachers are neither as confident or as assured writers as they are readers, and that tensions exist between their perceptions of self as teachers and/or writers (Cremin, 2006; Gannon and Davies, 2007) with consequences for classroom practice.

In seeking to connect teaching, writing and identity, this paper draws on a view of identity as plural, context-dependent and relational – that is enacted and developed through interactions with others (McCarthey and Moje, 2002). In exploring US literacy specialists’ identities as writers and their identities and performances as teachers of writing, McKinney and Giorgis (2009) reveal the conflictual nature of teachers’ writer identities. They expose some of the multiple discontinuities that exist, showing for example that teachers’ childhood experiences of school writing have complex consequences and repercussions on their identities as writers and teachers of writing and that these interplay with issues of power, control and status.
However, as with most of the other studies in this area, their work involved no observation in this context and was reliant on analysis of practitioners’ self-reports following writing modules/professional development courses. Cremin and Baker (2010) also employed an identity lens to explore the writing identities of practising primary teachers. They case studied UK teachers teaching writing in the classroom and, through analysis of video material, interviews, post-session reflections and video stimulated review, found likewise that the teachers enacted identity positions were often in conflict.

The evidence suggests that teachers’ conceptions of literacy, literate identities and pedagogic practice frame, shape and often limit students’ identities, both as readers (Hall et al. 2010; Hall, 2012) and as writers (Bourne, 2002; Ryan and Barton, 2014). It is therefore important for teachers to develop a sense of their own identities as writers and consider how they position themselves and their students in the writing classroom.

**You as a writer**

Do you see yourself as a writer? Do you choose to write in your own leisure time? Do you always have pen and paper, mobile phone, IPad or laptop to hand? What kinds of writing do you engage in most frequently? Do you enjoy some of these more than others? These are some of the many questions that as educators we can ask of ourselves in order to consider our writing lives and practices and how we use/ might use our personal experience of writing and being a writer in our teaching.

Linking to Commeyras et al.’s (2003) concept of ‘Reading Teachers’ as teachers who read and readers who teach, there is potential in developing Writing Teachers: teachers who write and writers who teach. Such teachers, it is argued, seek to share their writing lives and diverse practices with younger writers, continue to learn about writing through their reflective engagement as writers (in school and in everyday life), and explore the synergies between young people’s practices, preferences and lives as writers and their own. Reflecting on your writing history and early memories of writing is a good place to start as this can help gain distance and perspective and may prompt you to consider how such experiences may have influenced your development as a writer. You could create a Writing River which highlights significant writing memories, (see Figure 1), with memories from home, primary/secondary school/university. Are these positive recollections or ones of challenge? Was your work ever ‘made public’ – read aloud in school, published in a school magazine, community newsletter, or as part of a competition perhaps? Other people’s responses to writing can be influential, though so too can the personal satisfaction and commitment experienced through one’s own diary writing. What might the implications of these early memories be for your teaching? Case studies indicate that strong early experiences impact upon teachers’ current perceptions and practice in various layered and not always predictable ways (Cremin, 2006; McKinney and Giorgis, 2006). Yeo argues that teachers’ conceptualisations of writing are not connected to what they have been taught during pre-service education, nor to the kinds of composition and literacy that operate in 21st century, but that they
reflect their own childhood experiences of writing and later ‘induction into school literacy and classroom composition, which is very specific in its form and content’ (2007:125).

You could also make a contemporary collage with examples from the kinds of writing you engaged in on a weekend, noting the form, the audience, the purpose and the medium used: e.g. messages- to friends - to arrange a meeting place - through texts sent from your mobile? Such a list might prompt you to realise that whilst you may not write extended essays, newspaper articles, stories or poetry, you are a flexible writer, writing for a myriad of purposes and varying the tone and degree of detail according to purpose, context and readership. You will also, as an experienced writer, make use of diverse punctuation, emoticons, exclamation marks and different fonts for example to show reader how your message should be read.
You might also use the ‘Me as a Writer’ prompt (see Figure 2) to consider your strengths as a writer and what might this suggest about your strengths as a writing teacher? Your perceptions about writing have been shaped by personal experience – and this is also holds good for the young writers in your class too. Do you think the young people you teach see you as a writer? If not, what might the consequences be for their conceptions of writing and understanding its use and real world relevance?

You could share your reflections of your everyday writing life with your students, demonstrating that adults write for personal and professional purposes and have their own habits, preferences and practices which connect to their interests and roles. Students could create their own collages or spider diagrams in order to appreciate the diversity of their everyday writing practices or become ‘writing detectives’, recording examples of writing beyond school and exploring the ways in which such real world writing is used for example as an organisational and aesthetic tool, a prompt for thinking and shaping understanding, to maintain and reinforce relationships and a mode of communicating information.

Figure 2. A prompt diagram for ‘Me as a Writer’ spidergram (Cremin and Myhill, 2012: 105)
As a teacher of writing, do you recognise and validate this diversity, or tend to accept the version of school literacy and composition defined in current policy documentation? This version of writing is so persistently repeated and reinforced through curriculum requirements, assessment, training and teaching materials that it can remain uncontested. It is likely to frame and limit professional practice and young people’s learning about writing unless teachers’ seize opportunities to re-view writing and widen their subject knowledge, pedagogy and practice.

In taking a more consciously reflective role as writers, teachers often feel impelled to make changes to their pedagogy and practice and this can shape the children’s views of their teachers as writers and their growing competence and confidence as young writers themselves (Bearne et al. 2011). A stronger community of writers can be built in the classroom if teachers and support staff are able to connect to and share their writing lives and enable children to recognise and celebrate the diversity of their own writing practices.

**Positioning yourself as a writer in the classroom**

When teachers position themselves or are positioned as writers in school, they construct their writing identities in relation to the young people, other teachers, teaching assistants and others present in the classroom. The fluidity of their positions as writers will vary according to context and their interaction, but modelling an ‘authentically engaged writer’ can involve adopting a range of roles in order to help children develop confidence and competence as young writers. As Spiro (2007) demonstrates, teachers can plan, share and review their work as genuine members of the classroom community of writers. To offer an authentic model of a motivated and socially engaged writer, teachers often adopt a number of roles, including:

- engaged and reflective reader;
- authentic demonstrator of writing in front of the whole class;
- scribe for class compositions;
- fellow writer, writing alongside children in small group contexts;
- response partner;
- editor, co-editor and adviser;
- publisher of their own and their students’ work;
- writer in their everyday lives.

Research suggests two activities in particular help teachers position themselves as writers in the classroom: demonstration writing and writing alongside children, (Cremin and Baker, 2010). In demonstrating spontaneously, teachers can began to share the blank spots, uncertainties and emergent nature of drafting thinking on the flip chart or interactive whiteboard. Some have found that by thinking aloud their concerns, voicing their choices and defending their decisions, they are able to demonstrate the genuine struggle of writing and that this was of value to the children (Cremin and Myhill, 2012). However, some studies suggest that teachers are concerned about demonstrating writing in the public forum of the classroom (Cremin, 2006; Turvey, 2007). As a consequence, they may pre-write the haiku or
tanka for example in the privacy of their own homes, ‘pretending’ to demonstrate the act of composition in school. Others may simply avoid demonstration writing.

When writing alongside children, literally sitting alongside them, teachers may for example take part in journal writing, enabling children to draw on the ‘texts of their lives’ (Fecho, 2011) as a resource to retell, reinterpret, or remake their stories. Others may undertake the same set writing challenges publishing their own work alongside the younger writers. Practitioners have found that working ‘inside the process’ in this way, helps them appreciate the challenge of the tasks they set and enhances their empathy for child writers (Cremin, 2010). It can also enable teachers to seize informal opportunities to discuss emerging issues and difficulties, writer to writer. Many have found that children settle more quickly when they write alongside them and that through engaging in informal conversations from the position of a fellow writer, they were able to offer informed support and advice (Cremin, 2010). Children’s comments have included: ‘It’s only fair that they write with us because we’re all writing and the teachers aren’t just standing around talking’; ‘I like it when she writes with us - she does the same thing as us, so she’s one of us’, ‘It makes it easier - she doesn’t interrupt’; and ‘Sometimes she finds it hard, sometimes writing is’ (Gooch et al. 2009). These suggest that their teachers’ positions as writers were influencing the younger writers’ perspectives too.

**Recognising the challenges**

Whilst this teacher-writer stance, encompassing notions of writing, identity, role positions and pedagogic practice, affords new opportunities, it can also create challenges. Research suggests that teaching writing is a site of struggle since teachers’ identity positions are influenced not only by interaction and the wider institutional context, but significantly by their spontaneous compositions produced in class (Cremin and Baker, 2010). In this study, the ongoing writer-identity work of teacher-writers was examined as teachers sought to compose authentically and write alongside younger writers. The practitioners talked of their dual personas and positioning as ‘writers’ and as ‘teachers’, and stressed the tensions involved as they shifted in a moment-to-moment fashion between these two positions. The teachers’ relationships with their unfolding writing, their emotional engagement with each composition, and the degree of authenticity and authorial agency they experienced, appeared to impact upon their positioning as teachers and writers in the classroom (Cremin and Baker, 2010). Seeking to convey the constant fluctuation and struggle involved, this was conceptualised on a teacher-writer, writer-teacher identity continuum (Figure 3). It appeared at times that the teachers’ writing was more institutionally aligned (when they wrote as ‘teacher-writers’ seeking to fulfil school requirements and national policy expectations for example), whilst at other times, when their writing had more personal resonance, (when writing about the ‘texts of their lives’ for example) they sought to engage authentically as writers and positioned themselves towards the ‘writer-teacher’ end of the continuum. There was a constant oscillation between more conforming identities: teacher-writers writing for the system and more liberating identities: writer-teachers writing more for themselves (ibid). Thus whilst there are gains there are also challenges involved
for professionals who, in order to support young writers, position themselves/are positioned as writers in the classroom.

**Figure 3. A diagram to represent a teacher-writer, writer-teacher continuum (Cremin and Baker, 2010: 20)**

**Concluding thoughts**

If teachers take the time to reflect upon their histories, identities and practices as writers and write - alongside children and perhaps alongside colleagues too - they may come to voice more informed insider perspectives. They may also come to recognise and value their own writing lives. There are multiple roles available to teachers who want to offer a model of an engaged and socially interactive writer to children in classrooms, though it is not an easy task to transform new knowledge into pedagogic practice and the basis of instruction. What needs to be understood, Yeo (2007:127) asserts, ‘is the relationship between teaching, composition, and life’, and this requires openness and connection-making, as well as a desire to learn about compositional processes in different modes and media. Such openness has the potential to prompt consideration of how teachers conceptualise writing and themselves as writers and the modes of participation and writing identities made available to young people in school. It may also rejuvenate professional commitment to the challenge of teaching writing from a writer’s and a teacher’s point of view.
References


**About the authors**

**Teresa Cremin** is Professor of Education (Literacy) at The Open University. Teresa’s socio-cultural research is frequently co-participative, involving teachers as researchers within and beyond the classroom. Her research interests relate to teachers’ literate identities and practices, pedagogies which foster the building communities of readers and writers in primary phase classrooms and the role of creativity in teaching and learning. Recent projects have explored professional writers’ identities and composing practices storytelling and story acting; and extracurricular reading.

**Sally Baker** is a research student at The Open University and now lives in Australia. Sally’s research interests relate to students’ writing, assessment and transition, paying particular attention to the interface between compulsory schooling and higher education. Her research is located in the ‘academic literacies’ critical field of inquiry, which views language and writing as social practice, thus focusing the lens on writer identities, institutional power and issues of epistemology and contested spaces of meaning-making.