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## Motivating children to write with purpose and passion

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## CHAPTER 11

### Motivating children to write with purpose and passion

Teresa Cremin

#### Introduction

Teaching writing is a balancing act; real time and space need to be created for developing children's knowledge about language and the 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 say 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. 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 that 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 teach skills in context;
8. ensuring the creative involvement of the teacher.

(Cremin, 2015: 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 that tempt young writers to engage and play with ideas 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 they are trying to say,

although their ideas will be further developed when they actually write them down and again later if they choose to review and refine them. In a four-week unit on traditional tales, for example, extended periods of storytelling, dramatic investigation and considerable reading, writing, sharing and discussing will need to be undertaken. Explicit teaching of textual features will also be woven in, although some learning about folk and fairy tales will develop through immersion in the genre ( in shared, guided and independent reading, reading aloud and oral storytelling). Children can learn a great deal about story structure, narrative action, the language of characterisation and ways to explore themes through engaging as storytellers, storylisteners and storyactors (Grainger, 2005). This may also happen as part of the storytelling and story acting approach developed by Vivian Gussin Paley in the US (Paley, 1990). Whilst the approach varies slightly in different countries, its main components remain the same, namely that children tell their teacher a story which is scribed (storytelling), and later that day they enact their own and their peers' tales in the classroom (story acting). Research suggests the approach motivates young writers who develop print awareness and a sense of their own agency as authors (Nicolopoulou et al. 2015). As a consequence some start to compose their own tales on paper, and others as young as three come to scribe the stories of others which are later enacted (Cremin, 2017). In older classes working towards storytelling afternoons, when children share their chosen and well-rehearsed tales with other classes and /or parents or working towards the publication of a class anthology can help provide reasons for polishing their narratives.

Working towards the creation of a polished product at the end of a unit of work does help, although the route actually taken will depend on the children's interests, responses, questions and needs. Whilst planned writing opportunities need to be imaginatively framed to support such long-term goals, others will be seized as they surface, and related objectives 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 recreation of their narratives. 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, read, watched and told, as five-year-old Monesha's story reveals:

*First there was goldilocks and the three bears. The mummy bear cooked some porridge for dinner and Hello Kitty was making some cornflakes for their dinner. And Barbie had a big, big friend called Teddy. And the second name of Teddy was called Ravi. And power rangers had a fire in their house and the ambulance came to put it out. The end and then they bowed.*

It is clear Monesha is drawing upon traditional tales (heard and watched), tales from TV and popular culture and she is making connections to life experience (see Faulkner, 2017 for more details). The extended process of composition allows time for children to engage fully with a range of motivating activities that lead towards purposeful writing, and enables teachers to support young authors by following their interests and offering tailored support and teaching on the journey.

### **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, film, television and the lyrics of popular music. These are potent tools for motivating and engaging child writers. When children's personal responses are honoured and connections are made with the texts of popular culture and their 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 and providing time and space to write. 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, this must come first, otherwise writing can become a meaningless school activity (Cremin and Myhill, 2012). The breadth and variety of textual forms that exist represent a rich resource that children can lean on and learn from, and in the twenty-first century, many will be multimodal texts, so visual approaches to teaching writing are also needed (for ideas see Bearne et al. 2017). 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, 2015). Their multimodal explorations may, for example, involve them in discussing issues, hot-seating characters, playing with puppets, constructing story worlds with toys and objects, storytelling and acting, 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 learners are actively involved in shaping their understanding. The playscripts, PowerPoint presentations or persuasive arguments eventually produced, will have emerged through this active process of reading, exploring, creating, generating and representing meaning in texts.

Stepping inside texts imaginatively fosters children's creative capacity as writers, and writing in role increases authenticity and a sense of audience. 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 11.1). 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 being in a role 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 is an extension of the engaging enterprise in which they are involved. Collaborative writing is also a rich and underused activity in schools, yet it can enrich children's creativity and commitment. 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 trains of thought, and pursuing and extending their ideas in action as well as through reflection and critique.

[Insert Figure 11.1 here]

[caption] **FIGURE 11.1** Nathan's letter to his parents

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

During a unit of work that 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. Recent research into the teaching of grammar shows that this is most effective when it is embedded in contexts that are meaningful to



children (Myhill, 2009) and when teachers make the most of reading opportunities to reflect on the author's craft and explore how writers have chosen to express their ideas ( Bearne et al., 2017) . Teachers do need to develop children's capacity to make authorial choices and will want to set targets that relate to punctuation and spelling, for example, but these need to be balanced by targets that focus on composition and effect, and writing for example to persuade, amuse or shock, so that children are recognised as authors, communicators and meaning-makers.

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

To develop children's independence as writers and to motivate them, choice needs to be built into writing opportunities, encouraging them to make decisions about the purpose, form, structure and audience for their writing. Children frequently express a desire for more autonomy in writing, and value opportunities when they can exert agency over the process (Myhill, 2005; Cremin and Myhill, 2012). 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 existence. 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 on, 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 11.2).

Many teachers offer choice through writing journals. In these, children often write about their lives, their concerns and interests, fads and fashions, and experience and expertise, revealing something of themselves in the process. If they are able to personalise these, take them home and retain the right to share their work only if they choose, they serve to motivate children as writers. Space and time to write in these journals deserves to be protected, as children need time to develop ideas and many written explorations will remain unfinished. This is natural. Although opportunities to revisit earlier drafts and select one for polishing and publication are also important, as they allow the children to exercise their rights as authors.

Initially however children who have not experienced such freedom before may need help to decide the content and form of their writing, and may need encouragement 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.

[Insert Figure 11.2 here]

[caption]**FIGURE 11.2** Extracts from *Bonkerz*

Teachers also need to ensure that there is sufficient time and space for children to talk, 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. (for more ideas see Chamberlain, 2016)

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

In recent years there has been increased interest in the motivating power of teachers as role models and writers (e.g. Cremin, and Locke, 2017; Yeo, 2007). Many teachers demonstrate that they are writers in the classroom and share the various ways in which they use the written word on page and screen to communicate, organise, reflect and express themselves. In modelling the 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 show that they are writers and share the challenges and pleasures of 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. Yet studies also show teachers are not generally assured writers (Cremin and Oliver, 2016) and may need support and encouragement to write alongside children.

When writing publicly and authentically in front of children, teachers can 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 to see their teachers as writers and builds 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. (See the new UK based Teachers as Writers project at <http://www.arvon.org/schoolsandgroups/teachers-as-writers/>).

It is not enough, however, for teachers simply to engage as writers at the point of composition; they also need to take a full part in the creative contexts that 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 additionally support children's capacity to reflect upon and evaluate their writing, as they too seek to make more impact on the reader or persuade their intended audience of their viewpoint and can work as a genuine response partner with younger writers.

## **Conclusion**

Motivating young writers involves making writing a pleasure, an activity which has meaning making at its core. Writing that teachers require from children that is formally assessed is not meaning focused, and may well have the reverse effect, such that the major purpose becomes pleasing the teacher and passing the tests. This can lead to a preoccupation with form rather than substance. Writing for pleasure by contrast is essentially meaningful, volitional,

intrinsically motivated, writer-directed, and child and choice-led (Cremin, 2016). We need to make more time and space for such writing.

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

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