

## **Wind them up, let them go: the primacy of stimulus in the classroom.**

As a secondary teacher of English, I always felt that the way I taught children to write didn't reflect the way I went about the process as a professional writer myself. Of course, that's not to say I would recommend the unstructured, appallingly procrastinating way I work to anyone, but I was still concerned that I wasn't providing my pupils with "real" writing experiences. Since becoming a teacher educator, I have trained hundreds of teachers and student teachers to develop ways of handling creative writing which, for me, tackle some of those fundamental issues by emphasising the primacy of stimulus in the classroom.

Three writers sum up the problem for me. First, Celia Rees, in attempting to describe the writing process, talks of the relationship between thought and act:

"It took me a long time to realise that writing is not just about sitting at a word processor or a pad of paper and getting things down. Writing is everything: reading, going to the library, researching, taking photos and even thinking..."

This description of writing as being more than the physical process of putting pen to paper encapsulates how I *didn't* go about writing in my classroom. Indeed, my pupils spent considerable amounts of time "sitting at a word processor or pad of paper", getting or not getting things down as the case may be. The pupils saw writing as something done in class at a desk, while Rees acknowledges that writing involves a multitude of activities, from library research to taking the dog for a walk to clear the mind and approach an idea afresh.

Secondly, Philip Pullman describes one of the endemic difficulties with the redrafting approach:

"I don't agree with the emphasis that teachers lay on drafting. I never write drafts – I write final versions. I might write a dozen final versions of the same story, but with each one I set out to write it as a final

version.”

When I finish a draft, I always hope that I’ve got it right. I give it to friends or send it to a magazine in the fervent hope that they will recognise it as a masterpiece. Of course, that never happens, and I have to correct and develop and redraft, but Pullman’s observation is absolutely accurate: I never set out with the intention of producing a substandard piece for an audience, and I don’t believe children would either, were they not encouraged to do so by the redrafting approach.

The third writer who seemed to capture the tension I feel between my teaching and my writing is Jacqueline Wilson:

“All writers get asked where we get our ideas from. No writer can ever come up with a reasonable, convincing answer. You just don’t know – an idea bobs into your head, just like that.”

“Where do you get your ideas from?” is a perfectly valid question, but it is completely unanswerable. And yet, in my classroom, I assumed that thirty children would all find the ideas necessary to respond to the writing tasks I set them: in other words, I rarely allowed pupils to “bob”.

Central to this is how we see the very process of writing, but this huge topic is beyond the scope of this article: besides, I have always felt that “what works” is as far as we need to go. In that vein, a description of process that certainly does it for me is suggested by Jack Heffron in “The Writer’s Ideas Book” (2000), who proposes four stages:

Bending and Stretching

Exploring

Finding Form

Assessing and Developing

To which I add:

### Publishing

Heffron describes “bending and stretching” as a writer’s engagement with stimuli which prompt initial ideas: a glimpse from the top deck of a bus; an overheard conversation; an incident read about in a newspaper; an object discovered in a jumble sale. This acknowledges the “magpie” effect, that writers will catch ideas wherever they find themselves, play around with them and store them to explore later.

At the “exploring” stage, writers begin to make choices: first, to write up those initial ideas to completion; secondly, to incorporate the idea into a larger whole, perhaps combining it with others; thirdly, to store the idea for later development; and lastly, to reject the idea. To me, this element of choice is essential; writers make active decisions about those pieces they will write and about how they will write them.

If the choice is to continue, the writer faces decisions about form. Am I going to write a poem? If so, what kind? What decisions do I have to make about rhyme, imagery, etc. If narrative, am I going to write a short story, or a longer piece? What about theme? Am I going to write in the first, third or even second person (a favourite exercise of mine)? As writers become more confident and proficient in a variety of forms, a piece of writing which begins as one thing may well metamorphose into another.

Finally comes the commitment to writing, at the “assessing and developing” stage. As writers write, they are in a constant cycle of retrospective revision and forward planning. Effort is put into constructing the piece that will be, in Pullman’s terms, the writer’s first attempt at a final draft.

I add “publishing” to Heffron’s process because I believe it is the step which makes “someone who writes” a “writer”. There are many people who keep their writing in a desk drawer, determined that no one will see their work. This should not be trivialised, but celebrated, since what they do fulfils some intellectual, personal or

psychological need; the writing makes the person who writes *feel* more self aware, or at peace, or just *better*. However, becoming a writer means *publishing*. Of course, I do not mean the narrow sense of having work printed in a magazine or a volume, but in the much wider sense of *sharing the work with an audience*, and, even more so, being prepared to take into account the reaction of that audience. The person who writes and who then gives his or her work to a friend and says “what do you think?”, and who is prepared to listen and to defend or revise as appropriate, is a writer.

Considering again the activities common in my classroom, I rarely if ever offered pupils the opportunity to engage in the whole process. Most writing the pupils encountered began at the “Finding Form” stage. Indeed, they were rarely given the opportunity to “find” form, but instead had it imposed on them: “This week, we are going to do personal essays”; “After the holiday, we’re going to be looking at twist in the tail stories.” In a curriculum which stipulates skills to be taught, targets to be met and assessable outcomes to be overtaken, there is nothing *wrong* with this way of working; but we should ask ourselves if this has much to do with how writers really work.

In addition, tasks undertaken in this way have the process of writing as only one of a number of purposes. Most commonly, they are generated from some sort of reading activity. We “do” Macbeth, and ask the pupils to write Lady Macbeth’s suicide note. However, in doing this, we expect them to demonstrate a knowledge of the events of the play, an awareness of and empathy for the character of Lady Macbeth and the use effective Shakespearean language. In other words, there are *reading* intentions in the exercise, intentions which are laudable and necessary, but let us not fool ourselves that this is a *real* writing experience. I am now aware that the way I used to tackle creative writing in my classroom *could* at worst:

- impose the stimulus (“Let’s read the first chapter of “Cider with Rosie...”);
- impose the genre (“We’re going to write a personal essay...”);
- impose the structure (“Let’s look at how to write effective openings...”);
- limit thinking and writing time (“This has to be finished by next Monday...”); and

- limit writing opportunities (“A poem isn’t long enough in the exam, you’ll need a short story...”).

Therefore, if I was sincere in my desire to offer “real” writing experiences, more attention needed to be paid to the early stages of Heffron’s process, and pupils needed to be given more opportunity to play, explore, discover and choose. Indeed, I had to change the culture of the classroom, giving up a great deal of control over what, when and how the children wrote.

A considerable omission from the Scottish 5-14 Curriculum guidelines was the failure to recognise “Writing for Enjoyment” as a learning outcome, a peculiar oversight given that “Reading for Enjoyment” had its rightful place in the framework. Because of that, much imaginative work has been done in schools to develop a personal reading culture. Now that “Enjoyment and Choice” have been included in the new Curriculum for Excellence outcomes and experiences, teachers will have to revisit their pedagogy to develop a writing culture: the early experiences and outcomes identify the first steps in the development of writing:

I enjoy exploring and playing with the patterns and sounds of language,  
and can use what I learn.

This seems to me to demand taking account of pupil choice in the very early stages of writing, those acorns from which greater pieces grow. My personal prescription for this includes:

- Pupils and teachers spending twenty to thirty minutes a week writing something - *anything* - new.
- Pupils and teachers having a bank of stimuli to choose from.
- Pupils and teachers writing a little often.
- Pupils able to *choose* which pieces of writing they wish to finish.
- Pupils and teachers regularly sharing their writing with others for comment but without fear of assessment.
- Pupils writing for *real* audiences, not imagined ones.

The involvement of the teacher in regular, short exercises is crucial, just as it is crucial for teachers to model the role of readers. However, many teachers have the feeling that they “can’t write.” Needless to say, this feeling of inadequacy is usually illusory – teachers can write, have written and will write often, in one form or another – but it is largely irrelevant too: teachers don't have to write well in order to encourage their pupils to write, and it is only necessary that they *attempt the same process*. After all, isn't the purpose of education to ensure that the pupil one day surpasses the teacher?

However, workshops on stimulating writing almost never fail to convince teachers – and pupils - that they *can* write if they are given an opportunity to work briefly on something that inspires them; and if they are not inspired for that brief time, another stimulus will be coming along soon. Two weeks spent on a writing exercise to which half the group are unresponsive is two weeks wasted: if we spend twenty minutes on a stimulus exercise half the group dislikes, we have wasted twenty minutes, and the next twenty minute exercise will hopefully will catch the attention of many of those students. From seven or eight hours of stimulus work, it is likely that every student will have at least one and probably four or five pieces of writing which they might wish to finish. In giving pupils lots of opportunities to write little bits often, we actually use our time much more efficiently, offer lots of chances for success and, most importantly, recreate those first tentative steps every writer takes in finding their voice.

## **A Stimulus Exercise**

This exercise is one of my favourite workshop tasks: it rarely fails to produce some stunning work from a few in the group, and gives everyone a lot to think about.

### **Step 1**

When asked to write about themselves, pupils claim that nothing has ever happened to them, they have never been anywhere and they have never met anyone. They need a little coaxing to stimulate their memory.

Read this list of prompts to them as a word association exercise: don't give them a work sheet to fill out, it will be less successful. Thinking about any time from their childhood, they should write the first thing that comes into their heads: if more than one thing does, fine; if nothing comes to mind, that's okay too.

- Someone who meant a lot to you
- Someone you admired
- Someone or something you were scared of
- Someone who was your friend
- Someone who was your enemy
- Something you remember wearing
- A game or toy you remember
- A place which meant a lot to you
- A food you liked
- A food you hated
- A TV programme you watched
- A song you remember
- A smell you associate with that time
- A colour you associate with that time
- A sound you associate with that time

Of course, this can be followed up with feedback as desired: I usually do and it works well.

### **Step 2**

They should now focus on one of the answers above: I usually use “A place which meant a lot to you”. Again, ask them questions, stressing that they can be flexible.

“Three things” might be “up to” or “three things or more”:

- Write down three things you can see in this place.
- Write down three things you can smell in this place.
- Write down three things you can hear in this place.
- Write down the names of any people you associate with this place.
- Write down a time of day or year or weather you associate with this place.
- Write down three feelings you associate with this place.
- Write down at least one activity you associate with this place.

Again, a follow up feedback – usually sharing favourite places in pairs, works well, and often allows students to add more to their lists

### **Step 3**

Ask the students to write three sentences in three minutes on their favourite place. They should include at least 5 details from at least 3 of the bullet points above. Stress that they should not worry about fancy language or using imagery: simply write.

### **Step 4**

An exemplar works well for this activity. Pupils are often given the chance to work on their writing only after they have written a few hundred words, with a few general comments from the teacher written at the end. As a result, the qualitative improvement in a piece of work can be limited. Working closely on only three sentences gives students the opportunity to make giant leaps forward in their work for a few minutes of effort.

Here is one teenager's response. Her favourite place was Pitlochry, in the Scottish Highlands.

When the clatter of the waterfalls hit the rocks the smell of the woodland flowed like clear waves. It followed you wherever you went and got even fresher once you stepped outside. The wind blew the smell off the trees.

The point I usually make is that if they used a word like “waterfalls” or “woodland” twice, we would have criticised them for repetition: yet teachers ignore the fact that



there are seven instances of the word “the”, three of “you”, two “of the” and one “off the”, because we tend to feel they are essential, they are the glue which binds writing together; either that, or they simply don't register. But by editing *these* words, and by concentrating those which actually convey meaning and feeling, we can achieve very satisfying results:

clatter          waterfalls hit rocks smell woodland flowed  
like clear waves          followed          even fresher stepped  
outside          wind blew          smell          trees.

With just a little reformatting and reworking, this becomes:

Waterfalls clatter  
Hits rocks  
Woodland smell  
Flowed like clear waves  
Followed wherever  
Fresher  
Wind blew  
from the trees

And with just a little more:

Waterfalls clatter on rocks  
Woodland tang  
Flows clear-waved  
Follows everywhere  
Fresher  
Wind blown  
From the trees

Finally, the pupil in question chose to return the piece to prose form, happy that, in the space of ten minutes or so, she had made significant improvements:

The waterfalls clattered on the rocks, and the woodland tang flowed clear-waved, following me everywhere, wind-blown from the trees.

After examination of the exemplar, allow the students fifteen to twenty minutes to work on their three sentence description.

### **Step 5**

Do nothing! Students can carry on working on their piece *if they wish*, and many do. Here are a couple of teenage boys' excellent responses to

the exercise, with where they had reached at Step 4 highlighted.

### **Mull Geese**

**The foam of the sea rises over the iron ramp  
As it grinds against the concrete pier.  
In procession the cars rattle onto the island,  
Another summer holiday has begun.**

**We twist on narrow tarmac snakes  
Their movements have changed  
Or so it seems.  
At last we're there,  
Glad to see the gates shut.  
I'm first to volunteer for the job.**

**Leaping from the door  
I hurry to the gate  
A swift snatch at the bush as I go.  
A gooseberry rolls in my mouth  
As I swing across the entrance  
On my chariot of steel piping.**

**The car shudders on  
A volley of machine-gun fire as it crosses the grid  
That ought to wake the natives.**

**Here they come:  
Oddjob's on parade  
Army in tow,  
A battalion of beaks  
To inspect the new arrivals.**

**David Aird**

## Small-Time

Windows punished by  
rain which throws  
out of focus the gardens  
of neighbours

Behind my back, brilliant blue, muffled sounds,  
electric hum,  
chatter of a TV show, dishes put away,  
and a mother  
Working

And me in the everchanging landscape  
of my windowsill  
Red Ferrari, top down,  
boot open;  
gun, gloves, binoculars,  
a man of action.

Fast, black cars filled  
with bad guys drive  
along busy tarmac,  
dramatic enchantment  
on my wooden window ledge.  
Rain lashed roads,  
gunfire,  
flames and  
explosions  
hinder our hero.

In my head  
high tension  
oozes from the window  
and drips  
back into  
reality...

Ian Riley

These are some of the resource books I have found helpful over the years in planning workshops.

Carter, James. *Creating Writers*. London: Routledge Falmer, 2001. Print.

Edgar, Christopher, and Ron Padgett, eds. *Old Faithful*. New York: Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 1995. Print.

Harper, Graeme, ed. *Creative Writing Guidebook*. London: Continuum, 2008. Print.

Heffron, Jack. *The Writer's Idea Book*. Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 2000. Print.

Johnson, Claudia Hunter. *Crafting Short Screenplays That Connect*. Boston: Focal Press, 2000. Print.

Novakovich, Josip. *Fiction Writer's Workshop*. Cincinnati : Story Press, 1995. Print.

Statman, Mark. *Listener in the Snow*. New York: Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 2000. Print.

Stein, Sol. *Solutions for Novelists*. New York: Souvenir Press, 1999. Print.

Trottier, David. *The Screenwriter's Bible*. Portland: Silman-James Press, 1998. Print.

Ziegler, Alan. *The Writing Workshop Vol. 1*. New York: Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 1981. Print.

Ziegler, Alan. *The Writing Workshop Vol. 2*. New York: Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 1981. Print.

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