Premier’s English Teachers Association English Scholarship

Teacher and Student Writing Groups

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Teachers are writers. We regularly write reports, feedback, programs, and sample responses. While many teachers are confident in producing analytical and non-fiction texts, most are less willing to identify themselves as creative writers even though many would accept that teachers are most effective when explicitly modelling and undertaking the same tasks as their students. Some studies suggest that teachers who lack confidence in their perceived ability to write and teach writing may transmit negative judgements about writing that have ‘… consequences for classroom practice.’ (Cremin, 2006; Gannon and Davies, 2007).

My Teacher and Student Writing Groups scholarship project began as an exploration of successful, practical strategies to support teachers in developing a sense of identity as creative writers, with the specific aim of fostering confidence and improving outcomes for student writing. It became a way of experiencing myself as a reader and writer in different guises.

This report represents an overview of the study tour I undertook over four weeks in June 2016. Beginning with a week of home study and interviewing before travelling to the United Kingdom, I explored the possibilities of teachers being fully engaged within a writing sensibility. The key locations of London, Norwich, Stratford-upon-Avon and Plymouth proved to be effective hubs for further exploration as far afield as Canterbury and Penzance.

Rationale

In New South Wales, the English Years 7–10 Syllabus includes content descriptors that guide programs to ensure students progressively develop their understanding and apply knowledge of language forms and features as they respond to and compose texts (BOSTES, 2012: 24). The current Stage 6 English syllabus review and consultation process acknowledges the significance of student writing as an important mode of the subject and discipline of English.

English Textual Concepts, developed in collaboration between the Learning and Teaching Directorate, the NSW Department of Education and the English Teachers Association NSW, seeks to support teachers to ‘… design learning for high intellectual quality and … deep understanding …’ (2016). This conceptual framework allows teachers to chart the development of student cognizance in different modes of English and across six identified processes. For the purpose of this study, the modes of Reflecting and Experimenting are seen as of particular relevance in developing writing ability for both teachers and students.

There is a large body of research in the field of writing and its teaching. My literature review painted the current landscape of writing teachers and their identity and impact on pedagogical practice, as well as suggested gaps and possible future research projects. This was particularly helpful, but not limited to, the planning and application phase of my scholarship – I was also directed to relevant articles and unpublished research during my tour.

Where ‘Teachers as Writers: A Systematic Review’ (Cremin & Oliver, 2016) examines the corpus of this field from 1990 to 2015 and points to suggested areas for future research, it also notes the focus of research on preservice or teacher training. It points to a particular need for further studies to explore the identities of practicing secondary teachers, as well as their impact on students and their writing. Echoing this suggested research need is Frawley (2015), who challenges the dominant view of ‘reader’ and teacher of literature over that of ‘writer’ and teacher of writing. That positioning has deep implications for teacher confidence in the pedagogy of writing, and provides an opportunity for defining the ‘teacher-writer’ as a creative practitioner within the classroom.

In 2008, Gannon explored the established classroom practice of secondary teaching writers, including engagement with reading, the influence of significant others, and the experience of publication. The report finding of a two-year project (Locke, 2013) into professional identity with five high school teachers and co-researchers suggests implications for the design and implementation of professional development to support teachers’ self-efficacy as writers.

Significantly, Weaven (2015) questioned the style of, and purpose for, typical forms of research methodology and proposed a qualitative paradigm or arts-based research focus as being particularly applicable in the English classroom. With the introduction of the Australian Professional Teaching Standards, Weaven proposed the role of teachers as participants in the field of educational research might incorporate a creative product accompanied by an exegesis.

Leading up to my period of leave and throughout the scholarship tour, I posted a teacher   
survey on the English Teachers Association NSW Facebook page and the Department of Education Yammer site. Although the total response of 47 is not significant, the findings support the need for further research. Interestingly, just over half the respondents had more than 15 years teaching experience yet only two-thirds identified as ‘writer’ and 10 per cent were unsure. While 60 per cent described the relationship between writing and the teaching of writing as positive, 30 per cent nominated both positive and negative experiences. This highlights the need for a deeper understanding of writing-teacher identity and pedagogical practices within the ever-evolving contemporary classroom of standardised testing.

Fieldwork

During my three weeks in the United Kingdom, I was based in four locations that allowed daily travel to museums, writing centres, schools and universities.

While in London, I visited:

* + Brick Lane, East London: street art photography and zine inspiration
  + The British Museum: exhibitions Ten Acts of Shakespeare and Punk 1976–78
  + The Beaney: House of Art and Knowledge, Canterbury: writing exercises and the Poetry and Story for Growth and Healing workshop with Professor Geri Chavis, and interview with Charmaine Pollard, counsellor and writing therapist
  + Restaurant Story: interview with Simon Wrigley, co-director of the National Writing Project UK
  + Open University, Milton Keynes: interview with Professor Teresa Cremin
  + Wellcome Collection This is a Voice: exhibition as writing prompt
  + The Weald Community School, Billingshurst: interview with Theresa Gooda, Director of English and teachers writing group leader

While in Stratford-upon-Avon, I attended the National Association for the Teaching of English All the World’s a Classroom conference and delivered a presentation titled Conceptual Learning through Writing. I also participated in the half day Image to Text writing workshop delivered by Emma Carroll, Education Officer with Manchester City Gallery, and Carole Page, retired teacher educator.

Being based in Great Yarmouth, I was able to visit:

* + Norwich Writers Centre: Writing Across Lines: History, Memory and the Imagination workshop with Professor Elleke Boehmer
  + University of East Anglia: Character and Narrative writing workshop as part of the Festival of Literature for Young People, and interview with Visiting Fellow Jeni Smith, co-director of the National Writing Project UK and writing group leader
  + Sainsbury Centre for Visual Art: A Line Through Time (Alberto Giacometti) and Paris(Henri Cartier-Bresson): exhibitions as writing prompts

Plymouth, my final destination, allowed me to visit:

* + Falmouth: interview with writer and literacy consultant Wyl Menmuir
  + Marlborough School, Falmouth: interviews with classroom teachers Kath Rowe and Lou Gall
  + Penzance: interview with Katrina Naomi, poet, tutor and poetry mentor

Interviews

Academics and teachers I spoke with during the first week of leave – Susanne Gannon, Felicity Castagna and Marilyn Omerovic-Legg – broadened the picture created through my literature review. Despite some time since Gannon’s work reported in 2007–08, affect theory and the collection of qualitative data is favoured when trying to understand how students’ writing of teacher writers has improved. Notions of confidence and a willingness to write count for more than standardised test scores or Higher School Certificate results. The assessment regimes, or ‘high stakes’ environments mentioned in several articles, tends to influence teachers into binaries of teaching writing in often conservative and formulaic ways as opposed to writing for pleasure and as experimentation – despite the marking guidelines and BOSTES information for English Extension 2 promoting originality mentioned by Castagna.

In my discussion with Omerovic-Legg, she outlined her current class of refugees and students who require support, who chose Australia for its education and the ability to become ‘pilots, doctors … anything’. Yet in studying the English as Second Language course for the Higher School Certificate, the absence of a provision for creative or imaginative writing effectively ignores their personal voice and ‘magical turn of phrase’ that finds its way into the analytical extended responses.

I shared a working lunch with Simon Wrigley at Restaurant Story in London where he discussed his latest research from the National Writing Project UK concerning writing group leaders. Diners are invited to be part of the Storynarrative by exchanging a book through the ever-growing library. These ideas dovetail neatly with the creativity and enjoyment of wordcraft and writing, reading and listening, sharing and discussing ideas and stories. Lunch with Simon was a creative experience including moments of deep pedagogical and philosophical discussion, childish giggling and sharing of stories from the past and, unexpectedly, the taking of many photographs.

Travelling to Milton Keynes, I met with Professor Teresa Cremin and though our conversation was limited in time, it touched on many aspects of writing teachers and was peppered with recommended readings. We discussed my goals and objectives for conducting my study tour, including my plan to establish and maintain a teacher writing group with specific research intentions to study the impact on students and their writing. Teresa made thoughtful suggestions for structuring rigorous research aimed at reducing subjectivity and the ‘over-collection’ of data. We also discussed her current research project, Teachers as Writers, a collaboration between The Open University, Arvon Foundation and the University of Exeter.

Theresa Gooda, Director of English at The Weald Community School and writing group leader, passionately discussed her initial writing experience with Simon Wrigley and subsequent group leadership, beginning her blog and the instigation of Free Writing Friday at her school. Theresa revealed that while most English teachers at The Weald readily engage in reading, with half being regular members of three or four book clubs, very few identify as writers. This led to a consideration of the role of reading in writing for both teachers and students. Theresa readily acknowledges the transformative effect on her practice in that Theresa only invites student to voluntarily read their writing.

While in Norwich, I interviewed Jeni Smith, Visiting Fellow in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia, co-director of the National Writing Project and writing group leader. We walked the campus and talked about the value of movement in the creative process – letting ideas percolate and settle. We discussed similar views on the humanist approach to writing, and the role of teachers in assisting students to develop skills and confidence. Jeni shared practical strategies for maintaining group cohesion, together with writing booklets designed for inspiration over holiday breaks.

During my last week in the UK, I travelled to Falmouth to spend an overcast morning with Wyl Menmuir, passionate writer and educator. We discussed writing, teaching and the Teachers as Writers research project in which Wyl, as writer, is working with teachers at Marlborough School. Several years earlier, Wyl had organised a writing retreat with his (then) disadvantaged students to Lumb Bank in Yorkshire through the Arvon Foundation. This experience proved to be transformative for many students in recognising their ability to write. Wyl mentioned that the inspiration for his first novel occurred at his own writing retreat with Arvon.

Another aspect of this research was to consider the practical organisation of writing opportunities for students. My interest in supporting student writing goes beyond the one-off author visit to include programs of deeper engagement, including writer in residence, with interview questions reflecting a shift towards this focus. During my interview with Felicity Castagna, we discussed the role and selection of the writer in student workshops. From Charmaine Pollard, I learned about carousel structures for her regular school visits when delivering her therapeutic Courage to be Me writing workshops. The varied experiences of Katrina Naomi, poet and poetry tutor, have been influential in providing frameworks for writing residencies that range from inflexibility to laissez-faire.

Writing Workshops and Site Visits

Central to this project was my participation in different writing opportunities, including workshops, exhibitions and journaling. Those ranged from planned events to serendipitous encounters that inspired the creation of poetry and zines, as well as regular blog posts. Supporting students to successfully develop their own authentic voice, and to consider how meaning is created through language choices and audience consideration, requires that teachers also engage with authentic creativity.

My first week finished with visits to each of the ten primary feeder schools in the Moss Vale Community of Schools. These institutions are geographically distant and vary in size, which poses an interesting challenge for providing writer-in-residence workshops and programs. In my discussions during the day, it became apparent that, while some activities are shared across the sites, including athletics carnivals and music, this does not include writing activities.

During a writing workshop, formalities often disappear as group leaders participate in the structured activities. Professor Geri Chavis, who led the three-hour Introducing Poetry and Story for Growth and Healing warmly explored the power of creative expression through free association, simple analysis activities and discussions. These strategies are similar to what may happen in an English classroom when exploring different texts created by students. Teachers will instantly recognise the value of this approach in encouraging an authentic response with our students.

At Dragon Hall, home of the Norwich Writers Centre, I attended Professor Elleke Boehmer’s workshop titled Writing Across Lines: History, Memory and the Imagination. We considered how fiction allows us to explore big ideas – specifically notions of home in this workshop. We discussed prose extracts, paintings and poetry to develop our own representation of ‘home’. A series of writing exercises based on a personal memory and object led us to share our ideas before discussing how those writing moments could be fictionalised to allow a character to share their understanding with readers. This moving between the real and imagined is a practical method of engaging students with an understanding of becoming less emotionally involved with writing – a way of stepping back and engaging in the process itself, rather than believing first person narratives are non-fiction.

Facilitated by Lynne Bryan, novelist and short story writer, the Character and Narrative full-day writing workshop for teachers was part of the Festival of Literature for Young People at the University of East Anglia. Our small, dedicated group experimented with a range of writing prompts and ideas that could be adapted for classroom use. We also received a copy of *The Art* *of Writing Fiction* by Professor of Creative Writing Andrew Cowan. That text contains chapters with theoretical underpinnings for specific writing strategies that are suitable for a wide range of teacher and student writing.

The final formal workshop of my study tour was held at the National Association for Teachers of English conference and involved the Manchester Art Gallery. Two enthusiastic presenters, Emma Carroll and Carol Page, presented a series of activities that would normally be conducted at the gallery and followed up in the classroom. I was introduced to several new strategies and made note of how this could be integrated into a small group writing exercise. Mapping the image and creating a world outside the literal interpretation of the painting would effectively engage students with different skills and levels of confidence. I was particularly interested in having students move around the room as scouts - collecting ideas from different groups. That has the potential for rich writing and encouraging collaboration.

While in Falmouth, I was welcomed into the classrooms of Marlborough School to discuss and observe student writing activities. Kath Rowe teaches Year 5, identifies as a writer – commissioned to write for an educational text and currently working on her novel – and willingly agreed to participate in the Arvon led research project on writing teachers. I also spent time with Louise Gall in her Year 3 classroom. Lou reported that she never saw herself as a writer – ‘not at all’ – mentioned that she liked writing, but felt like she didn’t ‘do it very well’ despite keeping a blog.

Both Kath and Lou were energised by the week-long workshop and explained the impact on their teaching and approach to creativity and writing: by actively writing themselves, they rediscovered the difficulty within the practice that has allowed their teaching to reflect a freedom and acceptance of a more organic approach – rather than being ‘on their backs’ to produce something, students are encouraged to set their own writing agenda.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The results of my study tour point to the benefits, for both teachers and students, of developing learning opportunities for writing that are sustained over time. Ongoing research is an integral component in the professional development of writing teachers in order to share, inform and guide current and future practice.

Results from the initial teacher survey suggest that the following strategies are effective in supporting teachers to improve student writing:

* + face-to-face meetings
  + online community – webinar, Skype or similar
  + dedicated writing space at professional development events and conferences
  + closed Facebook groups
  + online collaborative documents – Google drive/docs

Regular writing events and meetings, through a teachers writing group, would address the disjointed aspect of one-off writing workshops, constituting an individual narrative of learning. Those could be supported with shared online spaces, such as webinars, closed discussion groups and collaborative documents, particularly for teachers in regional and isolated areas.

A writing retreat could energise professional practice in teaching imaginative writing through engaging with relevant sites. Guest speakers and published writers would add depth and provide an authentic perspective in deepening teacher knowledge.

Many models of successful ‘writer in residence’ programs can be adapted to suit individual school settings and communities of schools. Those would focus on prose, poetry, and non-fiction forms of writing depending on the identified needs of students and teachers.

These learning opportunities and strategies would also be suitable avenues for action research and goal setting, observations, networking and reflection within a professional development plan, and as part of teacher accreditation evidence, particularly at the highly accomplished and lead levels.

Planning and undertaking research into creativity in its many guises, whether institutional or individual, requires space for serendipitous learning opportunities. Many of my experiences came in the form of exhibitions, chance conversations with participants at scheduled events and even public transport. I greatly appreciate the individuals and corpus of thought that supported this scholarship experience.

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Endnote

Blog: <https://multimodalme.wordpress.com/teachers-as-writers/> contains posts from the study tour detailing significant learning experiences, examples of imaginative writing completed as part of this scholarship opportunity and an annotated bibliography.

*English Textual Concepts* <http://www.englishtextualconcepts.nsw.edu.au/>

*National Writing Project UK* <http://www.nwp.org.uk/>

*Restaurant Story* <http://www.restaurantstory.co.uk/>

*Teachers as Writers* <http://www.teachersaswriters.org/>