

READY, WILLING, AND ABLE: Boys & Writing



Action Research Report 2010

INTERNATIONAL BOYS' SCHOOLS COALITION

VOLUME II



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Introduction

DI LAYCOCK BARKER COLLEGE, HORNSBY, AUSTRALIA

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The International Boys' Schools Coalition commenced its Action Research Programme for member schools in 2005. Each year since, educators from around the world have applied to be part of this programme, wherein a common research topic is investigated in members' respective schools.

Working from within the supportive environment of the programme's online learning community, researchers identify and ask questions about an area of their practice, find out what's known about it, modify or design a strategy to enhance that practice, determine how to measure its impact, and assess how well it has worked, and with what results. It is research on the front-line of teaching boys, and action that contributes to ongoing improvement in practice.

The success of its action research programme is striking vindication of the international dimension of the IBSC, and eloquent proof that boys' educators from around the globe can collaborate and learn from one another – enriching both their professional lives and the quality of education for their students. Moreover, the findings of the projects in this publication demonstrate that boys' schools are sites of excellence in learning and teaching; places where teachers continually reflect on and improve their practice.

Members of the fifth cycle of the IBSC's action research programme addressed the question: *How can we help boys become prolific, powerful and confident writers?* A team of 22 teachers, the biggest team to date, from countries including Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Canada, South Africa, the UK and the US worked on a variety of exciting projects, the findings of which are presented here. These findings were presented at the annual IBSC Conference in Philadelphia and published on the IBSC website. The 2009–2010 team was also privileged to be able to share and discuss their projects in Philadelphia at a pre-conference Masterclass presented by Professor Thomas Newkirk, a prominent commentator and researcher in the area of boys' literacy.

The topic of boys' writing was considered worthy of investigation in light of studies that indicate many boys are often not writing with confidence, nor writing prolifically, and that they do not particularly enjoy the process. The research also indicates that many factors have contributed to this situation: the so-called "feminisation" of writing, the over-emphasis on writing for assessment and achievement rather than for a meaningful audience, limited choice of topics and structure, and so on.

A number of clear themes became evident as the team pursued their research projects. The first theme focused on the ways in which Web 2.0 applications such as wikis, discussion boards and blogs can change the way boys feel about writing tasks, and encourage them to become more powerful, prolific and confident writers.

A second theme of the projects highlighted the importance of audience and feedback for boy writers. Teachers explored a variety of ways to provide an authentic audience and worthwhile feedback to encourage their boys to write. One of these projects evaluated the effect of using anonymity in writing, while another used a process of selective correction to encourage second language writers of English.

The third theme in the projects relates to the use of a variety of prompts and stimuli to encourage boys to write, whilst the final area of focus examined the value of collaborative projects in engaging boys in the writing process.

It is hoped that the work of the researchers involved in this action research project will resonate with readers. The reports bring practitioners' intuitive and unarticulated craft knowledge to the surface and acknowledge what teachers do in the "messes" of our complex classroom environments (Newkirk, 2009, p. 28). These reports celebrate the nature of teaching as "particularized, situated, child-specific, class-specific, day-specific [and] school specific" (Newkirk, p. 29), and in doing so, have the potential to empower us to uncover new meaning in our practice, and motivate us to share, challenge and change such practice for the betterment of the boys in our schools.

References

Newkirk, T. (2009). *Holding on to good ideas in a time of bad ones: Six literacy principles worth fighting for*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Does Using a Variety of Stimuli that Cater to all Learning Styles Help Boys Become Confident, Powerful and Prolific Writers of Poetry?

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Abstract

This report summarises a year-long investigation into the effect that implementing a learning styles approach had upon the prolificacy, power and confidence of a group of boys when writing poetry. The project was undertaken with boys in Year 7 and Year 8, 11 to 13 year olds respectively, at Aldwickbury School, UK. Aldwickbury is a non-selective independent school, but most of the boys operate at or above national expectations. A range of methods was used to collect data; surveys, interviews, written feedback from the boys following lessons, informal conversation, notes, and the resultant work. The results broadly support the fact that boys responded well to tasks delivered in their preferred learning style. However, there was also evidence to suggest that some boys perceived their work to be 'best' when the initial stimulus had been delivered in a style other than their preferred learning style.

Introduction

From the outset I felt that looking at writing as a whole was simply too big a task to undertake. Therefore, my reading and my own interest determined from quite early on that I would focus upon one aspect of writing, poetry. This decision was made, at least in part, because I have found that the poetry section of our Common Entrance exam (taken in Year 8 for transfer at age 13+ to independent senior schooling in the UK) is tackled least successfully by the boys. The second determining reason for this choice was my own love of poetry and a desire for the boys to enjoy it too; a view borne out by Eve Bearne:

When a teacher is enthusiastic and knowledgeable, those things rub off and make for successful learning. (1998, p. 34)

The final reason for this choice came from reading Noble, Brown and Murphy's work in which they stated:

[Since 2000] the new curriculum [National Curriculum, UK] tends to be more hostile to boys... teaching has become more content and less process orientated. This penalises both sexes, but particularly boys whose favoured learning styles are squeezed out. (2001, p. 24)

My reading suggested that this particular view of boys' preferred learning styles contrasted with the views held by other academics and researchers. Some researchers, such as Bricheno and Younger (2004), remain unconvinced of the reliability of research into learning styles and question its validity. Having cited several examples of research to highlight reservations about learning styles work, they conclude:

It is clear, then, that there is a dislocation between practice and research. The notions on fixed, stable and differentiated learning styles which can be accurately measured... have become increasingly challenged through time. (p. 5)

I therefore set out to investigate what impact delivering lessons in as visual, auditory and kinaesthetic manner as possible would have upon the boys' poetry writing. Would boys respond more confidently, powerfully and prolifically as writers as a consequence of working to tasks that 'suited' their preferred learning style?

DEFINITION OF TERMS

In order to define confidence, power and prolificacy I asked boys in Year 8 what they perceived the terms to mean. Prolific writing, in their opinion, meant having an idea and just being able to 'get on with it' – the work 'flowed' from idea to execution. One boy said that you "*have no regrets and have confidence in the work.*" They believed powerful writing to be confident writing that used strong vocabulary and good ideas. Confident writing was when you could 'do' the work without any doubts.

Approach

An action research approach was used and a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data was collected to establish what factors contributed to the boys feeling confident and enabled them to write powerfully and prolifically. Action research was the most appropriate method of research as it enabled me to reflect upon my own practice in order to better help the boys in my classes. As I will be sharing my work with colleagues, it is "A form of collective self-enquiry [that seeks] to improve the rationality and justice ...of educational practices" (Kemmis and McTaggart, cited in Cohen *et al.*, 2006, p. 298).

Research Sample

The research sample involved 59 of the 60 boys in school Years 7 and 8; there were 27 boys in Year 7 and 32 in Year 8. In terms of socio-economic background, the group must be considered as being quite similar. This is the case because the school is fee-paying and services an affluent commuter town close to London. The group was not particularly ethnically diverse; approximately ten per cent would be considered as being from an ethnic group other than 'white indigenous'.

In terms of education, as has been touched upon, the school is a non-selective independent school. This said, of the 59 boys only 4 would be considered as operating below national expectation in English; 12 were operating above, and a further 14 were operating significantly above national expectation. Both year groups were reasonably typical of the cohorts they preceded. While we will be losing the Year 8 boys, we will obviously retain the Year 7 boys and so we will be able to use their data in particular to inform and improve how we teach them next year.

Data Collection

In the first instance, the boys completed an attitudinal survey, investigating their general attitudes to writing. I administered a further survey with questions focusing upon poetry and in particular the boys' attitude to reading and writing poetry, whilst maintaining the style of the general survey for consistency of presentation. This survey was given prior to the written work in late September. A follow up survey with some questions repeated for comparison purposes was completed at the end of the Christmas Term, after the written tasks had been undertaken, in December. A mixture of open, closed and rank order style questions was used.

In between the two surveys I carried out three poetry tasks, introducing each one in a different learning style; auditory, kinaesthetic and visual. Each task was scheduled to last one week and at the end of the week the boys completed a form commenting upon the work, in terms of how it was delivered and how they felt about the outcome of the task.

Following the Christmas holiday there was an enforced hiatus in the research as I had to plan for boys in Year 8, and possibly some in Year 7, taking school entry exams. However, I was not idle during that period and, as soon as I knew which boys were involved in exam preparation, I selected six boys randomly from the rest to interview. Each interview followed the same questions and I only intervened if a reply required further clarification.

Following the exam period I had time for one more activity. This activity was delivered in a slightly different way. There were four different starting points from which the boys could choose, one in each of the learning styles and one in a 'mixed' manner, with the boys ultimately writing an 'association poem'. As with the three lesson activities before Christmas, the boys completed a comment sheet. In addition, they responded to three closed questions, and an open question inviting a short personal response to the task.

Finally, it was my intention to administer an 'exit survey' to all of the boys. Unfortunately, due to time constraints and unanticipated demands upon a large number of boys in Year 7 in the closing stages, only boys in Year 8 were able to complete this. Nevertheless, their responses provided a sizeable body of useful data. The exit survey required a written response to the following three questions:

1. *What aspects of the stimulus helped you to write more confidently?*
2. *What aspects of the stimulus allowed you to write powerfully?*
3. *Which tasks, or task, have helped you to write the most or better?*

Results

Before my research began, all of the boys in Year 8 had completed a commercially available learning styles diagnostic test, as part of their study skills support work. I talked with the Year 7 boys about this and they then responded to the same test: 15 boys identified as being visual learners, 25 as being auditory learners and 19 as kinaesthetic learners.

SELECTED RESULTS FROM THE SURVEYS

Where a response to a question is rank ordered a lower total reflects the boys' greater preference. Other tables show mean average responses on a scale of '0' to '10', with '0' being strong disagreement and '10' being full agreement.

The following questions allowed me to see the boys' general attitude to poetry and to poetry writing before and after the intervention.

Q 1 I like to read poetry for myself (Mean Average Response)

	1st Survey Response	2nd Survey Response
Visual Learners	4.20	5.08
Auditory Learners	4.28	3.61
Kinaesthetic Learners	4.63	3.94

Q 4 I like to write poetry for myself (Mean Average Response)

	1st Survey Response	2nd Survey Response
Visual Learners	4.27	5.08
Auditory Learners	4.16	4.81
Kinaesthetic Learners	4.37	5.17

Q 6 I like it when we study a poem (Mean Average Response)

	1st Survey Response	2nd Survey Response
Visual Learners	5.80	6.25
Auditory Learners	5.40	6.24
Kinaesthetic Learners	4.89	6.00

Q 12* Rank order the following styles of writing in order of preference – 1 being your most preferred down to 5 your least favourite style

	Story		Factual		Argument or Debate		Poetry		Descriptive	
Visual	26	16	47	46	56	45	47	31	49	42
Auditory	44	34	87	78	96	84	73	58	75	61
Kinaesthetic	39	36	66	63	60	67	61	50	59	54

*Q 11 on Second Survey. The numbers in bold denote second survey response.

SELECTED FIRST SURVEY QUESTIONS

Q 7 I write best when the teacher shows me something to write about (Mean Average Response)

	Survey Response
Visual Learners	7.73
Auditory Learners	6.52
Kinaesthetic Learners	7.11

Q 8 I write best when the teacher lets me listen to something first (Mean Average Response)

	Survey Response
Visual Learners	4.67
Auditory Learners	5.68
Kinaesthetic Learners	5.74

Q 9 I write best when I have been allowed to move about, touch objects or do something first (Mean Average Response)

	Survey Response
Visual Learners	4.47
Auditory Learners	6.40
Kinaesthetic Learners	5.89

Q 13 Tick only *one* statement: I write best when I...

	Look at something first	Listen to something first	Do something first
Visual Learners	11	3	1
Auditory Learners	1	18	6
Kinaesthetic Learners	6	3	10

SELECTED SECOND SURVEY QUESTIONS

Q 7 Looking back I enjoyed writing best when I...

	Look at something first	Listen to something first	Do something first
Visual Learners	21	22	29
Auditory Learners	51	38	43
Kinaesthetic Learners	30	38	40

The response was rank ordered with 1 being the 'best' response.

Q 8 Looking back which task produced your best writing? Tick only *one* box

	Look at something first	Listen to something first	Do something first
Visual Learners	3	6	3
Auditory Learners	9	8	5
Kinaesthetic Learners	11	5	2

Q 12 To write well you need...

	Time	To look at something first	To listen to something first	To do something first	Choice
Visual Learners	23	39	29	49	40
Auditory Learners	32	73	64	80	67
Kinaesthetic Learners	33	57	57	68	55

The responses were rank ordered

Question 11 invited the boys to complete a sentence, "I write best when...", and 23 boys responded: 4 of those responses concerned quiet and solitude; 6 concerned specific aspects of learning styles – acting, for example; 8 mentioned time or choice; and the rest referred to being outdoors (See Appendix 1).

The final activity survey, completed by 56 boys, showed that half of them chose the mixed approach to get started. However, when it came to saying which task was most liked 44% chose the visual task because there was a written example to refer to.

FROM THE BOYS' LESSON RESPONSES

Each of the lessons that the boys were asked to respond to was introduced in a different way. Looking for, cutting out, rearranging and sticking words that suggested 'hero or heroism'; listening to several distinctly different pieces of music; and responding to questions about a chosen painting, for example. Here are a few selected examples of the boys' responses, in the order that the lessons were delivered:

Kinaesthetic Lesson

"I like practical lessons and discussion lessons. Poetry isn't my strong point but finding the words helped me so much." (Auditory Learner)

"I particularly enjoyed the fact that I got ideas by doing something practical." (Kinaesthetic Learner)

"I enjoyed the way the lesson was introduced because it was independent and I didn't know exactly what I was going to do with the words we found." (Auditory Learner)

"I enjoyed using the newspaper articles because it helped me to use words that I might not have used otherwise." (Auditory Learner)

"I liked the fact that it was 'active'." (Auditory Learner)

"7 or 8/10 I liked being able to get a bit more 'hands on' with English." (Visual Learner)

Auditory Lesson

"I really enjoyed this because I felt that it set the mood and there was a really good selection of music. As well as that it added a rhythm and a pace that I could work with." (Auditory Learner)

"I liked it more than the cutting and sticking lesson as the music really did set off my imagination." (Visual Learner)

"I did enjoy it. This is because it gave me some good ideas and gave me more to do than just write at a desk." (Kinaesthetic Learner)

"I really enjoyed it in that listening to a piece of music inspired me so much. Each song gave you a wide variety of words to think of. My poem turned out to be a success and I would like to do it more often." (Visual Learner)

"I enjoyed having the music as inspiration; it was interesting what ideas we came up with. I liked the way it was relaxing but work at the same time. I also liked writing with music on so you could brainstorm and write whilst the music told your story." (Auditory Learner)

Visual Lesson

"I enjoyed looking at the picture and writing about it. And now I have started to enjoy poetry." (Visual Learner)

"I found this very enjoyable because looking at the picture made me feel I was in the picture and helped me be a bit more creative." (Kinaesthetic Learner)

"I enjoyed this because I felt that [I was] seeing what I was going to write about. It definitely gave me ideas about the time period and what was going on in the picture." (Kinaesthetic Learner)

"I really enjoyed this activity. The picture helped you to get a good thinking process. Lots of words sprung into my mind which helped." (Visual Learner)

FROM THE INTERVIEWS

The interview work provided me with perhaps the least enlightening feedback. Looking back, I feel that I could have structured the questions more effectively and have pushed them for more detail in their responses at the time. Nevertheless, there were some interesting responses. All of the boys professed to feel a degree of anxiety about poetry before we began the project and all confirmed that, to varying degrees, this had been alleviated. Perhaps the most confident reply was this one:

"I feel a lot more confident with it and definitely would like to write more poetry and I have got more of an imagination to write and I also like reading poetry now and it has helped me with different parts of English."

What had changed their minds was mostly an understanding that poetry is not confining and restricting; this is best summarised by this response:

"Well, I think the thing that's changed my mind is that you can write almost anything on poetry. You can write lots of things."

There was no overall agreement as to what aspects of the lesson delivery it was that helped the most to write strong poetry. The following responses highlight the differences well:

"I think the music, the listening exercise, helped because you could make your choice, you could make a sense of whatever you want about the music whereas the pictures you just had to see what was there and you couldn't really think on your own as much."

"The picture was most definitely the most helpful. The music helped quite a lot and I didn't think the sticking and gluing helped that much because it was a bit fiddly. The paintings one meant you could just get on with your poem but you had your notes but you didn't have to stick to them."

There was general assent that these activities could be adapted and used to help improve aspects of English such as descriptive and narrative writing.

FROM THE EXIT SURVEY

Thirty-one boys responded to the exit survey. Approximately one third made reference to time being a major factor in terms of their confidence, power and prolificacy; approximately two thirds made reference to choice; and seven made reference to freedom – to choose the content for the task and how they structured the resultant writing. Perhaps the most complete and representative responses were the following:

"The aspects of the work which helped me to write more confidently include that we had a lot of time to think about our pieces and we had time to develop our work as we had a week."

"The aspects of the work that allowed me to write powerfully are that we could write freely depending on the task, we didn't have to follow a certain theme so we could write about what we were given better."

Very few of these responses made reference to the learning style nature of the tasks or the impact that it had.

Discussion

The results pose some challenges for the teaching of poetry writing and writing in general:

If one is going to write in a genre, it is very helpful to have read in that genre first. (NCTE, 2004, p. 5).

This view is certainly borne out by my survey findings; the low average responses to Question 1 suggest that boys are not choosing to read poetry of their own volition. The implication for the future is that we must explore avenues that will encourage the reading of poetry in order to help improve writing and confidence in this genre. This is further reinforced by the result from Question 6 which suggests that where the boys have had a greater exposure to poetry their enjoyment of it has increased. And, their response to Question 12 demonstrates a significant change in attitude indicating a greater confidence with this genre.

[It is important] to acknowledge the difficulty of measuring and identifying students' preferred learning styles. (Bricheno and Younger, 2004. p. 21.)

I was never aiming to prove, or disprove, any of the theories concerning learning style but I was curious to see if my cohort mirrored either of the predominant schools of thought. Noble, Brown and Murphy refer to earlier work carried out by Hanon and Haines and support the view that boys are predominantly kinaesthetic learners; their figures suggest that 29% are visual learners, 34% auditory learners, and 37% kinaesthetic learners. This view has been supported in a number of government papers and some research by teaching unions referred to in some of my key readings. On the other hand, in various publications, Marsh, Bearne, Fletcher and Millard support the view that boys learn best visually. My cohort reflects neither of these schools of thought, with the highest proportion being auditory learners. This variance might simply be a reflection of the fact that it is very difficult to make unequivocal judgements where learning styles are concerned.

Of course, Bricheno and Younger were referring to learning styles and learning. But my data would suggest a similar difficulty with regard to the boys' responses to the lesson stimuli. The selected examples of the boys' lesson responses show that their confidence with a task is not limited solely to those introduced in their preferred learning style.

The implication for learning and teaching is that we will need to ensure that we plan for tasks to be introduced in as varied a manner as possible in order to engage all of our boys effectively. This is a view shared by OFSTED, the UK's government watchdog for education, who observed that successful practice was best when it made "...conscious use of a variety of strategies to engage all pupils" (2007, p. 7). And weight is added by Graham Frater's assertions in his *Improving Boys' Literacy* (1997) in strong support of multi-modal learning throughout.

Interestingly, Question 8 of the second survey invited the boys to look back at their work and make a judgement as to which task led to their best piece of work. As a cohort, in the boys' opinion, a visual stimulus appeared to generate their best writing. However, a closer examination of the table shows that not one group within the cohort actually felt that they produced their best writing when responding to a stimulus delivered in their preferred learning style.

OTHER ISSUES

As part of any discussion we have at school in the light of this work, we must consider the more individual learning needs and desires in Question 11 (See Appendix 1) that reflect what some boys perceive to be important in order to be confident, powerful and prolific writers. There is increasing interest in the UK regarding the Outdoor Learning Environment (OLE), and some of the learning needs raised as a result of this question would be part of that discussion and may indeed warrant investigation in another cycle of action research.

Another aspect that clearly requires further investigation is the impact that time and choice had upon the boys' confidence as writers. Many of the boys commented that these aspects of the work had more of an effect on their confidence than the learning styles nature of the lessons themselves.

Conclusion

Clearly, no one style is best when considering how to introduce work to boys. However, there is some evidence in the data to support a view that visual learning is perceived to be effective regardless of the stated preferred learning styles of the cohort.

We must ensure that we introduce work in as varied manner as possible in order to engage all boys, and we need to take account of factors, other than learning styles, that a significant minority of the cohort reported as having an impact on their writing.

The findings reflect the importance of variety; a multi-modal approach to teaching and learning is crucial if we are to help boys to become more powerful, prolific and confident writers.

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Appendix 1

Question 11: I write best when...

Code	Additional Comments to Question 11
12	I write best when I am alone
15	When I am on my own and with lots of time
18	When we have a class discussion to give us ideas
19	I have something before, like playing sport
20	In a peaceful atmosphere
22	When I am not given a set amount to do and with no time limit
23	When I think of something myself
32	When it's about someone
38	I write either outside or listening to music
39	The window is open, hearing the sounds of nature and getting cooler fresh air
40	When I have lots of time to write and we have a class discussion
41	When we're allowed to write about anything
43	When I look at a picture and nothing else
44	When I am outdoors
45	Someone describes a scene to write about
47	The teacher lets us write about anything
48	I am given a style to write in but can choose what to write about
49	Movement (acting) around the classroom
50	Not confined to do something
52	I'm outdoors
55	I'm in a comfort zone listening to music at the same time
58	I'm told to write based on another passage
60	I am given a title

A SELECTION OF THE POETRY

Waiting for the gun to go
 Pressured by the crowd
 The other racers must feel the same thing too
 He's determined to win the race.
 The gun goes he starts to run as fast as he can like a
 Cheetah catching its prey as he sees the person in first
 Fall over and he starts to run as fast as he can for the final stretch

*

The guns are shooting, the bombs are dropping
 Everywhere I look bodies on the street, people falling to the ground.
 London is ruined, houses destroyed, fires burning.
 People sit outside what is left of their house crying.
 Everyone is homeless, no house, no food.
 I want to save them but I can't.
 Explosions everywhere, I am just sitting here watching people die around me.
 Planes flying over my head
 I am angry and sad
 I want this to stop.

*

Two minutes to twelve, the tension's building.
 The misty hills are yearning.
 The government are sending us over the top, they have no
 choice, destiny is calling...
 For we are the young ones, not the pride of the country, no
 triggers on our fingers, no strong arms.
 Yet we serve our country, as many like us have done before.
 And yet the generals sit in their offices, smoking cigars
 and sip their whisky, they don't care. As long as they get their
 pension it's fine.
 I've always heard people say, 'It will be over by Christmas.'
 Well, it's over for them and me very soon.
 The whistle blows.
 They start to run.
 The faces on the other side are unrecognisable the only
 thing they see; the drifting dirt,
 as pollen released from a flower,
 mixed with the mist of the air
 little splats of fire.

*

A knight, his splendid armour gleams,
 The night has ended the sun beams.
 His sword is drawn forget the strife.
 He's after the princess as his wife.
 For the town's in mayhem, it's a chaotic mess.
 The knight must rescue the damsel in distress.

The terrifying monster lays in wait
 Waiting for the knight to chance his fate.
 It is a fierce fight disturbing to the eye
 In the end the monster lets out a piercing cry.
 The knight rescued the princess received heroic applause
 And the mayor thanked him for the mighty cause.

The town celebrated until the sun had set
 But that's not the end of this fairytale yet.
 It can never be over without a classical ending
 So here it is the great saying pending.
 The town was full with happiness and laughter
 The princess and the knight lived happily ever after!

*

Another day without him
 and still no hand-written letter.
 The hyacinths now start to droop,
 like the hope of seeing him again.
 Hoping for that double knock on the door,
 but hope is not enough.
 Sometimes I feel like lying down in the buttercups
 and let them make a resting place around me.
 Maybe I will find him there,
 under the endless blue skies
 of that fabled place above.

Looking at pictures,
 a temporary relief from the pain,
 and now I feel as if the clouds will press down on me
 and the fog will engulf me,
 weaving its evil magic around my tender body.

*

Gazing into his sparkling eyes
 The love of my life slowly fading
 These are the memories I treasure
 The stench of death wafts under my nose
 One solemn glass of brandy in my hand
 The dawn of a new day
 Not knowing what horror it will bring
 The nauseating sight of the bed where we slept
 Together entwined like dark smoke
 Those feelings start to fade
 Like the stub of our last cigarette

*

I think about him night and day
 The meeting point was not far away, I stepped through the door
 I waited for him thinking he would be here any minute
 I heard the clock strike seven then eight
 I felt like part of me had gone and would never come back
 But the grief for him will never leave me

*

Walking away means leaving him forever
 Staying means a life of slavery
 Making breakfast, cleaning his clothes
 A life of lonely sorrow
 When I sleep it feels like an empty bed
 Even though my keeper is right there beside me
 The awkward mornings with nothing to say
 I dream of a new life, with more love
 A night in with a bottle of wine
 Some classic Frank Sinatra and a box of tissues
 A night out with the girls out at the bar
 Meeting some fella
 Who will only break my heart

*

My song is ending
Another page closed
A line too short bittering my sweetness
Fate plucked its victim
Like strings on a harp
Somehow I'm in the chord
Though the pain is leaving
A line too short
Has come too long
Another note gone

Reflection

It has been an incredibly busy year but hugely worthwhile. I really do feel that I have benefited as an individual by being involved in this project. The benefits to me have been many. By being involved I have had to read widely. Perhaps because of all of the conflicting demands upon our time none of us really are able to be 'reflective practitioners' to the extent that we might desire. I certainly have felt this for some time. Making time to read around my subject has certainly helped me to think about my practice and challenged me to question myself: I have been able to justify to myself why I do certain things and now have a better understanding of the educational theory that underpins it.

I have been able to draw upon the skills and experience of teachers from across the globe and have, I hope, been able to offer something to them too. It has been interesting to learn of the similar frustrations that each experiences in their own teaching worlds. Equally, it has been fascinating to hear how they do things and there is a lot to be recommended from other countries that we could adopt here in the UK: certainly there are ideas that I will be 'stealing'! We have been communicating through a closed website and the level of support and help that people have received on a range of issues from professional to personal, in addition to the project work, has been amazing.

There has also been the fringe benefit that beyond the poetry generated by the project some of the boys have approached the poetry section of CE more positively too, but I think that this might be a subject for another occasion!

There have been trials along the way and there have been frustrations. The project has inevitably meant extra work. But for all that, I would still say that it has been a terrific year and I must particularly thank Di and Margot for this; their support and guidance have been immense. Thank you both very much!

Men Who Write: Using a Published Author as a Role-Model for Boy Writers

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Abstract

This action research project was conducted with a class of Year 9 boys aged 13–14 years at Poole Grammar School in Poole, Dorset, United Kingdom. The project focussed on whether or not the intervention of an author in residence would affect the boys' attitudes to writing, and if it would help them become prolific, powerful and confident writers. Data were initially collected from documentary evidence. As the project progressed, the boys completed evaluations and questionnaires, and workshops run by the author were videotaped, as were interviews with the boys. The boys compiled portfolios of the work they had undertaken, both drafts and final copies. The outcomes of working with an author suggested the boys' levels of engagement and confidence have grown. Significantly for many, their self-esteem as writers has risen. Subsequently, their ability to find the correct words has increased and they find it more possible than before to communicate powerfully and write more prolifically.

Research Question

Men who write: To what extent will boys' writing become more prolific, powerful and confident if they are encouraged to see themselves as writers through working with a writer in residence?

Confidence, in the context of this research, defines a boy's self-belief and assurance in his ability to communicate through writing. *Powerful* means that a boy can find an effective, suitable voice to communicate his ideas through choice of style, language and form, with reference to the audience for whom he is writing. *Prolific* means the ability to transfer ideas and thought into writing with ease and then also the abundance that can follow from this.

Introduction and Literature Review

I find that there is a distinct difference between my students' oral and written abilities. The contrast amazes me. Discussions are frequently vital and insightful but final draft written work can be insubstantial and poorly structured. Many of the boys say that they cannot get their thoughts down on paper. Why is this? Is it that they simply cannot find the words to write because they do

not have sufficient vocabulary to express their ideas? Orally they can express themselves, so the problem obviously occurs when asked to write thoughts down on paper. Is writing problematic because they do not have the necessary skills to communicate effectively in writing? Is it simply that they are disinterested, disengaged? At 13–14 years old they are burgeoning into manhood and writing has an image problem. Newkirk (2002) notes the cultural perception that “Real men.... have better things to do than read or write” (p. 170).

Would putting a role-model and a mentor in the classroom improve the boys’ poor writing performance? Certainly, some of the boys’ writing seems not to have matured since earlier school stages, perhaps because the skills have not been taught explicitly. Daly (2002) notes that, “there is a lack of large-scale studies of the impact of gender on the progression in writing”. It is this lack of ‘progression’ that I witness on a daily basis. Daly points out that teachers, Head teachers and LEAs recognize the issue of boys’ underachievement and that written public examinations form the data from which this underachievement can be seen. I am very aware that as teachers we assign and mark written work but, I would argue, the skills required to write effectively and maturely are often overlooked. We assume our students possess them and, therefore, do not teach them directly. We tend to focus on the requirements of the **task set** rather than the necessary writing techniques or skills needed for the completion of it. A role-model writer would, I hoped, address this as he would be able to mentor the boys to enable them to complete tasks to a level of maturity they felt they had reached within themselves. Spence (2008) comments, “How do we expect students to write complex pieces of writing with little or no direct instruction?” (p. 22). One of my students, who is part of this study, told me that at his first school he had always written pages of writing but that he now finds it difficult to do so. Brown (2009) comments that after one-to-one conferences with students to discuss both the technical and structural aspects of their writing as well as its content, “my students have never written better papers”.

Placing an author as a role-model for the craft of writing would also, I hoped, reduce boys’ feelings of under-confidence and vulnerability. Dr. Adam Cox (2010), a clinical psychologist, in his presentation *Helping Boys to Communicate and Connect* observed that boys are more eager to communicate when vulnerability is minimised. In *Boys of Few Words* (2006) he notes that in males vulnerability is something to be avoided; “boys do not like to feel unsure of themselves, and they will actively avoid situations and experiences that deflate their self-esteem and sense of competence.” (p. 63) This is, I think, transferable to a writing situation. Lashlie (2005) refers to the intrinsically competitive aspects of the male world. She observes that when unsure of something boys disengage; they do not want to feel foolish in front of girls and each other and so they choose to remain quiet or silent. This, I would argue, is also transferable to their view of writing. The boys can feel vulnerable and inadequate to a set writing task because they lack the skills to complete it effectively. This results in a lack of confidence and they disengage. Moreover because it is not generally seen as valuable or important in our culture for men to write they find it quite easy to disengage. The value of role-models is apparent in much of what I have read. Lashlie (2005) discovered that the “good” men the boys aspired to be “were the men they knew personally... In this group were their grandfathers, their uncles, their older brothers... their teachers and their coaches” (p. 201). Other role-models of men in “the public eye” (p. 200) or “sportsmen” (p. 201) were useful in engendering aspirations towards freedom, wealth, glamour and the dedication often needed to achieve certain goals in life, but personal contact seemed to be the key factor in determining how they saw themselves and who they wanted to be. Similarly, Biddulph (2000) cites the example of one student who provided a role-model for a highly competitive, “spoiled and indulged” peer:

There was no contest. Rob found himself upstaged by Daniel in every discussion, and the beauty of it was that Daniel was not even trying to compete....His modesty was palpably sincere. He was simply a book lover.....Anyone could see that and everyone did. Even Rob. His [good] reaction would have surprised those who had known him as a younger student. (p. 120–121)

Again the personal contact of the role-model is important in influencing positive behaviour and outcomes. Fletcher (2006) gives examples of how important a role-model can be in a learning situation. He cites how one student, Joseph, began in the fourth-grade to see himself as a writer:

His teacher that year was Steven Tullar. Steve was assisted by Pete Schiat, a former fifth-grade teacher who came out of retirement to work with the class on a regular basis. Schiat taught the kids a form of prose poetry known as "Nature's Eye". Those students wrote every day, and they became adept at describing what they saw in nature. (p. 152)

Moreover, Spence (2008) cites the "Boys to Men" mentoring programme implemented in schools across Toronto, Canada in the early 1990s. He states, "The program is built upon the creation and maintenance of strong caring relationships between adult male role-models and male students." (p. 76) He adds, "The mentor may be a teacher, coach, staff adviser, administrator or educational assistant – all of these have proven to be effective" (p. 76). At Rockcliffe Middle School in Toronto this involved, amongst many other things, mentors reading with their mentees. The success of this part of the strategy led to the school investing in "resources to develop boys' literacy" (p. 79). Everyone's response was overwhelmingly positive. Although these programmes were one-to-one programmes for socially as well as educationally "at-risk boys" (p. 76), I thought this approach would be transferable to my classroom. The involvement of a role-model writer in the classroom to form personal relationships with the boys in order to mentor them through the writing process seemed to be a natural extension of this approach.

Research Context

Poole Grammar School in Poole, Dorset, United Kingdom is a selective six-form entry school for boys from 12-18 years old. Although selective, the school is dedicated to serving the local community and, therefore our students come from Poole and its environs. It is a very successful school and is one of the top 100 state secondary schools in the country. I am the Literacy Advisor. My post exists because for the majority of the boys who pass the entrance test to the school each year, the English component is their lowest mark. The boys' grammatical skills are often weak, as is their ability to structure and organise their writing. A multi-stranded Literacy Policy has been introduced to address this. Its first focus has been on reading and so my research project has started the next phase of this strategy on writing.

Research Methodology

Action research is classroom-based and it stems from the desire of educational practitioners to improve classroom practice. "Good teachers have always systematically looked at the effects of their teaching on student learning" (Mills, 2007, p. 13). It is a mainly qualitative method of research that is integral and organic as it evolves from the classroom. This made it a very appropriate method for my research project as it enabled me to formalise my own classroom observations

through this “reflective practice” (Mills, 2007, p. 5) and make them more meaningful. My research also had a quantitative aspect as I began by scrutinising documentary evidence on the boys’ performance at writing using national level criteria. As with any research, it must be conducted with the necessary rigour and transparency to ensure validity and credibility. Action research carried out thus is very valuable as it can “effect positive educational change in the specific school environment that was studied” (Mills, 2007, p. 4) and, therefore, improve “student outcomes and the lives of those involved” (Mills, 2007, p. 5). This relevance and this power to improve the learning of students which are the greatest strengths of action research.

The Sample

For my research project I selected my Year 9 English class of twenty-nine 13–14 year old boys. I chose them because they are settled and established students, having had one year at the school, and are not yet experiencing the pressures of a public examination curriculum. Moreover, it is at this age that their weaknesses in writing are most evident. They are moving into manhood, but often their writing abilities remain immature and unsophisticated.

The Intervention

I invited Rob Chidley an ex-Grammarian and a published fiction author, to work with the class. I decided he would be an excellent role-model for them. His first novel *The Third Tribe* (2009) falls within genres which interest the boys. I therefore thought he would be able to connect with them on many levels. He worked with them for four lessons over a period of about eight weeks and he worked with me consistently throughout the project to plan and discuss ideas and strategies and to offer advice.

In this intervention, Rob worked with the boys over a series of lessons to create a synopsis, blurb, first chapter, climactic scene and finally front cover for their own novel, with a view to submitting it to a publisher and with the intention of completing it if they wished to do so by the end of the project. Along the way, poetry and thesaurus work was undertaken to develop vocabulary and skills of expression.

We decided that at the first workshop Rob would give them a copy of *The Third Tribe*, which was set as reading homework for two weeks. This strategy allowed Rob to introduce himself by way of a gift and also enabled the boys immediately to see the fruit of his success and give him credibility as a role-model. It would also familiarise them with his style and give them a view of a successful story that he would use later to help them to write their own stories. Necessarily, Rob’s method for ways of teaching story writing was completely different from my own. The fact that he was from outside education, and from ‘the real world’, altered the ambience in the classroom.

In the first session Rob began by talking to them about the process of writing and becoming an author. He discussed with them how everyone loves stories, about how storytelling is built into all of us, into all societies. He took them back to the importance of storytelling within communities before the advent of books. We discussed together where we find stories – on television, on film, in magazines, in video games, by talking to each other and, of course, in books. It was decided that we all have an insatiable appetite for stories.

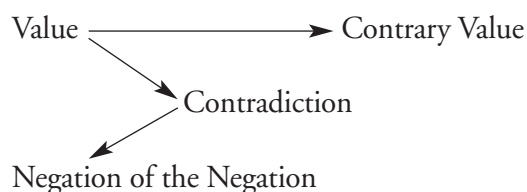
Then he proceeded to talk with them about the process and purpose of story writing. Using his 'Quotable Quotes' sheet (Appendix A), he began by engaging them with humour. He quoted Ernest Hemingway, 'The first draft of anything is #####'. For the blanks the boys substituted the word 'fish' and this became the catch phrase for the writing sessions that followed. Everything unsatisfactory became 'fish'! The final quote would form the basis of the work ahead:

“THE WRITER SHAPES STORY AROUND.....
WHAT’S WORTH LIVING FOR,
WHAT’S WORTH DYING FOR,
WHAT’S FOOLISH TO PURSUE,
THE MEANING OF JUSTICE,
TRUTH
-THE ESSENTIAL VALUES”

To craft characters and situations effectively a good vocabulary is required and so we agreed on the need to expand the boys' vocabulary to improve their ability to find exactly the right words to express their ideas and create their characters and settings. In the lessons between Rob's workshops the boys created poetry and used thesauruses to improve their vocabulary and power with words. These tasks also helped them to learn the value of drafting and redrafting their ideas. The first poetry task was to write a poem about a hero (Appendix C).



In the second workshop Rob began with a focus on 'values'. Under Rob's guidance, the boys discussed and attributed values to a given story. In this part of the session the concept of what exactly the values are that underlie a story were explored. He then went on to explain how values were the core of every story and how they interacted with each other within a story. He gave them what the boys termed 'the values formula' as the basis of story writing:



If **truth** is the value, then **silence** would be the contrary value, **lies** would be the contradiction and **a lie based on truth** would be the negation of the negation. He told the boys that from this structural device their fictional stories would be created. More discussion and explanation of these concepts followed. They were then introduced to the structure of a story arch (Appendix B). In

groups they planned a very rudimentary story arch of their own, based on values. The idea of the synopsis and the blurb was introduced through reference to *The Third Tribe*.



Finally, they were set the task of brainstorming story ideas using ‘the values formula’. In subsequent lessons they had to decide which set of values and story idea they would use. Then they had to create a synopsis and blurb for the chosen story for the next workshop. I also set them the second poetry task (Appendix C).

In the final two workshops, work was done on how to establish setting and characterisation. Traditionally in the classroom the story title or idea, whether prescribed or not, becomes the focus and usually rather two-dimensional characters are created that are narrative-driven. Through this intervention, the boys were introduced to the empowering technique of characters driving the narrative and coming alive in the creator’s head. In tackling characterisation, Rob discussed with them how he had created Ruth, one of the main characters in *The Third Tribe*. He explained the need for authenticity and believability. He introduced the idea that she had in a certain way taken over her own characterisation and how this made writing powerful. He also worked with them on how to write the first chapter; the necessity to set time and place and to introduce the main character, the protagonist or antagonist; and “the sorts of forces the reader is going to deal with in your story, your world”. Then the boys were advised how to construct “the climactic scene” effectively by putting their main character “under tremendous pressure, giving him a real decision”. The tasks of writing an engaging first chapter and resolving the crisis of the climactic scene were then undertaken.

During these sessions Rob emphasised the necessity to discuss and share ideas and then think, to talk and then be silent to work in concentration and thought. Rob shared his own new work with the boys and, as mentioned earlier, explained how his characters become autonomous; he never quite knows which decisions they will make. Only through thought, he told them, will he discover these. Silence and *thinking time*, therefore, became embedded in our work routine. The remaining lessons were spent drafting and redrafting work until the final copy was produced. The final task was to produce a suitable front cover.

Data Collection

- I began by accessing documentary evidence of their English results in the entrance examination and their subsequent Literacy lesson grouping. Then I scrutinised the Key Stage Results and Predictions Table which shows their national examination results level at the end of Year 6 when they were 10–11 years old and from this predicts their national examination result level at the end of Year 9. I referenced the Special Educational Needs register for information on boys with particular problems. I also used the Key Stage 3 national writing level descriptors to inform the criteria to grade their work.
- At the beginning and end of the project, I gave the boys the same questionnaire, and in addition I asked them to write a first evaluation in the middle of the process and then a second one at the end of the process (Appendix D).
- Whilst Rob was doing the workshops, I observed them, took video footage and made notes afterwards.
- During the process I gathered evidence from conversations with the boys.
- I formally interviewed a large cross section of the class at the end of the project. The interviews were conducted individually in a private office to ensure the boys would feel free to express opinions. These were videotaped (Appendix D sample questions).
- The boys each compiled a portfolio of writing.

Data Analysis

My starting point was to analyse the documentary evidence. This gave me a statistical viewpoint of the boys' abilities. From this I placed the boys in three groups by ability. Group 1 represented the most able pupils, those who had over 70% chance of achieving national curriculum level 7 by the end of Year 9. Group 2 were those of average ability, those who had about an equal chance of gaining a level 6 or level 7. Group 3 were those of the lowest ability, those who were more likely to achieve a level 6.

To make tracking easier, I decided to use a group of 12 boys to help me focus my findings. It is important to emphasise here that although I used this strategy to aid my analysis, the boys were unaware of it. The group was not openly identified as a focus group. The 12 identified boys represented a broad cross-section of the class from all three groupings; the weakest, the strongest, those in the middle, those under-performing, those with SEN (Special Educational Needs), etc. I used them as a benchmark to track progress. They would be the representative sample I would interview at the end of the project. It is important to stress that throughout the project I evaluated the performance of the **whole** class. I did not wish to pre-judge or exclude any outcomes of the research; hence in the end I interviewed 17 rather than 12 boys.

My analysis was, in the main, more reflective. In the direct observation sessions I was continually analysing the responses of the class whilst videoing and I later wrote notes about the sessions. The questionnaires and written evaluations allowed the boys to be self-reflective and I collated their responses on spreadsheets. I did find the questionnaires less useful than I had expected. At the beginning it was fairly useful in establishing how they felt about writing and themselves as writers but, with hindsight, I would have changed several of the questions as they turned out not to be very

relevant to my research question. When I gave it out again at the end to try to establish a sense of progression, I found that they did not find it a helpful way of expressing what they felt. Many said they had already answered the questions, and others said it did not allow them to say what they wanted to say. This is why I asked them for a second written evaluation using guideline questions (Appendix D). In more casual conversations, I noted down comments as I felt it was important that spontaneous responses were recorded to represent, albeit in a rather random manner, the voice of the participants. I recorded the formal interviews with boys to provide authenticity and transparency and wrote transcripts of the interviews. Whilst interviewing I continually analysed responses in order to gather as much in-depth useful information as I could. I therefore allowed the boys to speak rather than being overly constraining and prescriptive with my questioning.

The portfolio of work, which contained the drafts as well as final copies of the work set, illustrates the journey of the project for each participant, and the Key Stage 3 national writing level descriptors table was used to grade the work.

Results

At the beginning, the questionnaire established that about half the class ‘agreed’ and the other half ‘strongly agreed’ that ‘writing is important’. No-one disagreed so this was a good starting point. This questionnaire did have some other interesting responses. In answer to the first question, just under half of the class responded that ‘As a writer’ they felt ‘confident’, ‘reasonable’ or ‘fluent’ but only a couple said they felt their writing was ‘coherent’ and only a quarter of the class said they thought it was ‘logical’. Interestingly, the boys’ opinions of their abilities did not match the data. It tended to be the weaker boys in Groups 2 and 3 who thought they were ‘confident’. Those from Group 1 tended to respond ‘reasonable’ or even ‘awkward’. A mixture responded ‘fluent’.

From the outset, having a published author in the room changed the ambience. The boys were expectant and excited, much as they would be to have any visitor from outside school. It was, however, more than that. I had chosen Rob because I thought he would be an ideal role-model for them. This was key to the success of the project. One boy said that it was important to him that *“he has been where we are and he has written a book.”* In the final written evaluation three quarters of the class indicated that it was the fact that he was an author which had mattered to them most. The boys acknowledged Rob’s expertise in writing very quickly and I could see they trusted him to tell them how to write; they had confidence in him as a role-model. One of the boys who, though statistically in Group 1 finds writing difficult, went out and bought a new folder in which to put his work with Rob. This was a response from one individual, but it was an early sign of enthusiasm. He told me, *“When I was little I was confident, but I didn’t write much in my middle school. I decided I couldn’t write. Then after writing this, I could write again.”*

It was in the second workshop, however, that I began to realise that this intervention was going to be interesting. When introduced to the concept of the values underlying every story, the boys implicitly understood the necessity for values within a story, and how this related back to human beings’ enjoyment of stories and the need to tell them. The boys were very enthusiastic about ‘the values formula’ Rob gave them for writing their stories. This was key to igniting their confidence in their ability to write. It gave them a way to formulate and then structure ideas for a successful outcome. *“I find that [value formula] really useful because you can make different plans from that one*

plan. You can make different stories from the same values.” Most of the boys in the first written evaluation also cited this as being one of the most important things they got out of the project. One of the problems that many of them had faced before was that their story writing had been unsatisfactory because the plot had disappeared in so many unconnected directions and, therefore, made little sense by the end. They had then deemed it “rubbish” and had consequently lacked confidence in their ability to write creatively. *“I’ve learned that a story can’t afford to get sidetracked from the planned ending.”*

By this point both poetry tasks had been completed. They were successful in developing accuracy of expression and a more extensive vocabulary to aid written expression, as these extracts illustrate:

Home is where I can be at peace when the world is hissing and cussing at me,
Where the beat of a bird's wings can be a symphony or a cacophony, it's up to me,
Where I can stay no questions asked, when turmoil is attacking me,

Home is the place where the awake world dies and somnolence takes over
Where the aroma of fresh food floats up the stairs and makes you peckish
Where you can lounge around and nobody cares

Where the pungent, yet aromatic
scent of sea water fills your body
with the sense of freedom

In response to being questioned as to whether or not they had experienced the power of their characters becoming autonomous in their story creation, some boys in Groups 1 and 2 said they had experienced this.

“I spent a lot of my own time writing it because I liked it a lot. I liked writing it because I wanted to know what happens to the judge, to Jeff because I didn’t know because I was just writing it.”

Those in Group 3 had not:

“I’ve really tried but no, I haven’t found this.”

In the second written evaluation 23 of the class had noticed positive changes in their attitude and ability to write. All of these said that they felt more confident about writing. Over a quarter of the class said they felt their writing had become more powerful. Two-thirds of the class said they felt they had become more prolific either through ease of getting ideas down on paper or through abundance. When examined alongside the earlier written evaluation and the interviews, the overwhelming majority felt confidence had increased and well over half felt that they had become more powerful writers or more prolific or both.

“I now feel a lot more **confident** in my writing during this term because I can now properly plan out stories in my head and on a piece of paper... I think that my ability to write has improved massively over this term...”

"I write much more writing with more **power** now because I use more detail. I am also more confident. ...I'm starting to write more complicated plots with more problems arising to make the story more interesting."

"[My writing has] definitely improved really. I feel that I can **just put pen to paper** and basically make a story."

"I can explore the ways I can write and it has shown me just **how much I can produce** in such a little time."

In the end only one boy commented entirely negatively about the intervention.

"I don't think it has helped me... No, I don't write more, I don't feel more confident or that my writing is more powerful."

Four others expressed some negativity:

"No, I don't find myself wanting to write more, and I still see it[writing] as something **needed in school**, but I feel I can do a better job now, making my work more descriptive and dynamic."

"I'm **still reluctant** to do any writing."

The boys' individual portfolios recorded the journey well. They are testament to the work put into them and happily most have achieved Key Stage 3 national writing level 7. Most pleasing is that some of these are from boys in Group 3.

Conclusion

During this intervention the boys were very engaged and motivated when writing. The intervention of a role-model had given them confidence because the boys knew they were being mentored by someone who writes professionally. From this confidence, power and prolificacy have followed in many instances. Rob's intervention has given them a way to begin, to structure their work and to express their ideas powerfully, more easily and to a standard with which they are happy. Both oral and written feedback has been overwhelmingly positive from the boys. Looking at all of the data I have collected, I can see that the boys' confidence in writing has certainly increased. Well over half of the class said they feel their writing has become more powerful and also more prolific in terms of getting ideas from their imaginations onto paper, and perhaps about a quarter of the class have started to write more. Importantly, what they write now is far more engaging, has structure and order, and makes more sense.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

From the success of this intervention and my findings, I would wish to include an experience like this in the future for all Year 8 or 9 boys. There is so little space in the modern curriculum for this kind of work. The abandonment of the Key Stage 3 public examinations at the end of Year 9 has given us the freedom to be able to provide a space in which our pupils can be enriched, and I think this is immensely valuable.

An unexpected result was that many boys said that they are finding writing in other areas of the curriculum easier through learning to write from their imaginations. It would be very interesting to research further into how to help boys improve other types of writing both within English and across the curriculum through the use of writers as role-models from other areas of professional writing such as academia, journalism or non-fiction writing.

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Appendix A

QUOTABLE QUOTES:

1. “Story is about the realities, not the mysteries of writing.”
– Robert McKee, Screen-writing Guru

2. “Writing is easy. All you do is stare at a blank sheet of paper until drops of blood form on your forehead.”
– Gene Fowler, Screenwriter and Author

3. “The first draft of anything is #####.”
– Ernest Hemingway, Nobel Prize for Literature Winner

4. “Stories are equipment for living.”
– Kenneth Burke, American Literary Theorist and Philosopher

5. “The writer shapes story around.....
what’s worth living for,
what’s worth dying for,
what’s foolish to pursue,
the meaning of justice,
truth
—the essential values”

– Robert McKee

Does that sound easy to you?

Or does it sound exciting?

Appendix B

STORY PLANNING WORKSHOPS: YEAR NINE SCHEME OF WORK

Plan Story Arch

You will have to identify:

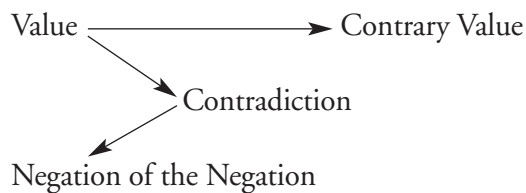
1. Value worth pursuing
2. Character to pursue it
3. Antagonist: a force, organisation or a person
4. Climactic Scene: True dilemma
5. Climactic Scene: Sacrifice
6. Resolution

Each one must logically follow from the previous.

Value

Identify the key value that your story will deal with. This may stay ‘under the surface’ of what you do in this exercise, but you’ll need to know it. On the subject of how their universes work, Robert McKee said that writers don’t need to think, “writers know.”

This key value may be more complex than you think. You need to know what the ‘worst case scenario’ is when pursuing this value.



Value: Truth/Answers

Contrary: Silence

Contradiction: Lies

N of N: A ‘true lie’, e.g. a lie based on truth

Synopsis

Your synopsis is the kernel of your story. It should make people say, “ooooohhhhh!” when they hear it. It also proves very useful for writing the real story for two reasons: one, you have a clear guide to work from; and two, you have your ready-made oooohhhh piece to send to publishers and agents.

3 short paragraphs:

1. Intro
2. Intrigue
3. Resolution

Blurb

This must retain the “ooooohhhhh!” factor, and you can enhance it by leaving an open question for the reader to wonder about. “Always leave them wanting more.” – Walt Disney

Use the first 2 of your 3 paragraphs:

1. Intro
2. Intrigue. End with an intriguing ‘question’.

Writing Your Story

Let’s simulate the process of writing a novel beginning to end. You have your synopsis and you have your blurb. Now let’s write two more significant sections.

1. The Opening Chapter

If you pitch your novel to an agent or a publisher, they might read your covering letter. If they like it, they might read your synopsis. If they like it, they might read your opening chapter. Your opening chapter has to be gripping, either through intrigue or excitement. Either way, it **must** make the reader want to know more.

Opening chapters tend to:

- Establish the setting
- Establish the main character’s characterisation
- Hint at true character – how? By putting the character under pressure.
- Hint at the values at stake
- Leave an open question or questions

Remember: Draw the reader in. Stimulate their senses.

2. The Climactic Scene

This is where the pressure on the character is greatest. They must take their most desperate action to resolve the crisis. This involves sacrifice of two irreconcilable goods (learning who you are OR protecting your mental health) or choosing the between two evils (e.g. saving the life of your child OR your wife).

Look at these two examples again. Good and evil are intertwined through both sets of choices. This is what makes the crisis and the climactic scene *really* work.

Now what?

You have: an opening chapter; a climactic scene; and a blurb. Add to this a cover design, and you have four major ingredients of a novel. You are a writer!

Appendix C

POETRY TASK ONE

Write a poem about your understanding of the word 'hero'

- What does the concept of a hero meant to you?
- Think about people you admire, role-models, real life heroes or fictional heroes or superheroes.
- You may write in any style and use any structure/form for the poem.
- The focus of the task is on finding exactly the right words to express your ideas.
- Draft and redraft your work until a satisfactory outcome is achieved.
- Use thesauruses to help and dictionaries to help you.

POETRY TASK TWO

Home

by Muhammad Haji Salleh

Home is the place where the diseased world dies
 at the door,
 where the floor and carpet are worn by familiar feet,
 where you can close your eyes and nobody says
 you are blind.

Home is where you don't have to be polite and
 sing cane-sweet song to coat bitterness.
 where familiarity accepts you in its security,
 where you know that love still breathes somewhere,
 where your wife and children keep the other half of you.

When the rain broadcasts the glass face of the fields
 and moves the tidemark of the canals,
 when you do not know where to go
 home is where they never say 'no'.

The small cottage that sits cosily under the palms,
 the atap, brown with time and age hangs to the field,
 the complaining hinges and wet stairs,
 home is you
 and where you hope to die.

From this stimulus write a poem entitled *Home*.

- What does the word 'home' mean to you?
- Think about the place on the planet or within yourself that you would call 'home'.
- It can be your actual home...it can be the place you most like to be....it can be somewhere deep down within yourself...the private you. It can be physical, emotional, philosophical.....
- The aim of this task is to express emotions and feelings.
- Use the poem to guide you for structure/form.
- Draft and redraft your work until a satisfactory outcome is achieved.
- Use thesauruses to help and dictionaries to help you.

Appendix D

QUESTIONNAIRE

Please answer all of the questions below. Be as honest and as thorough as you possibly can be. Thank you.

1. As a writer I am

Circle the words you think best describe you as a writer and add others that you think are also appropriate.

confident	sophisticated	mediocre	reluctant	clear
awkward	disorganized	logical	fluent	coherent

Other (*please specify*)

2. Writing is important. (circle one)

strongly disagree disagree agree strongly agree

3. Explain your choice in the best way that you can.

4. I prefer writing (circle one)

alone in collaboration with others

Explain your answer

5. The following things help me when I write (*circle as many as are applicable*)

Making a plan	Making a draft initially
Using technology	Writing for a particular reason e.g. a competition
Using an essay scaffold	Discussing ideas before starting to write
Writing under pressure	Having a brainstorming session
Having a choice of topic	Having an incentive e.g. a reward prize/credit

Other (*please specify*)

6. It helps me write when I get feedback from (*circle as many as are applicable*)

Relatives	Classmates
Father/male guardian	Friends
Mother/female guardian	Tutors
Teachers	Others (<i>please specify</i>)

7. I like to write outside of school.

yes no

-
8. Rank your level of engagement/enjoyment of the following writing styles with 1 being an extremely low level and 5 being an extremely high level.

Analytical	1	2	3	4	5
Fiction	1	2	3	4	5
Nonfiction	1	2	3	4	5
Poetry	1	2	3	4	5
Other (please specify)	1	2	3	4	5

9. I like sharing my writing with *(circle as many as are applicable)*

parents teachers classmates friends tutors
Others *(please specify)*

10. I like to use the following technology when I write.

(circle as many as are applicable)

blogging texting instant messaging emailing
power point wiki word processing
pen and paper podcast forum/chat

11. When writing I consider my audience.

always sometimes never

12. When writing for school assignments, I feel like I'm competing with my peers.

always sometimes never

13. Something I have trouble with when writing is...
-

14. When I write I wish I could...
-

15. Is there anything else you would like to say about the art of writing?
-

16. Explain a memorable experience involving writing that you have had.
-

First Written Evaluation (Mid Process)

GUIDE QUESTIONS:

Has how you feel about writing changed?

What have you learned?

Has your ability to structure ideas improved?

Has your ability to write improved?

Please be honest in your responses. Both negative and positive responses are welcome.

Second Written Evaluation

1. Did you enjoy meeting and working with Rob?
 2. Has he helped you to become a better writer?
 3. Which was more important:
 - a) that he is an author?
 - b) that he is an Old Grammarian?
 - c) equally important.
 4. Has:
 - a) your word power/vocabulary improved?
 - b) your ability to structure sentences improved?
 - c) your ability to get thoughts down on paper improved?
 5. Has your attitude to writing changed? If so, how? If not, why?
 6. Are you able to transfer the skills you have learned (e.g. structure/vocabulary) to other subjects/other learning situations?
 7. Do you feel you write more now? Do you feel more confident about writing? Is your writing more powerful now?
- Please write a final comment about anything you wish to tell me that is not covered in these questions.

Final Interview (videotaped)

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. We have been on a bit of a journey in this project...has this been useful to you?
2. Do you think your writing has improved? On your initial survey you said that it was.....
(confident, sophisticated, awkward etc.) Do you sense something has changed?
3. The structuring Rob suggested, the 'values'....do you think that gave you a basis to write from? Has it given you confidence?
4. Has your word power/vocabulary increased? Does this make your writing more powerful?
5. Was writing poetry and using thesauruses helpful?
6. Do you think your writing is more powerful now? Why, why not? Are there any other ways/reasons you think this project has helped your writing to become more powerful?
7. Can you get your thoughts down on paper more easily now? Do you write more?
8. What has changed in your ability to write/attitude to writing?
9. Do you find your characters come alive...become autonomous...do they take over or are they still very much paper based...driven by the story/the narrative?
10. Did you enjoy having a project to do over a period of time? Usually at school it is one lesson and one homework for a piece of work isn't it? Was it better to have more time – to draft/redraft?
11. What did you think of the task set by Rob?
12. Was it helpful to have an author in the classroom? Why, why not?
13. Did you think Rob was a good role-model? Why, why not?

Appendix E

BOYS' RESPONSES FROM WRITTEN EVALUATIONS AND INTERVIEWS

Each set of boys' comments that follow in this section are representative of views from all abilities (Groups 1–3) within the class. They are taken from evaluations or interviews.

'The values formula'

"I find that [value formula] really useful because you can make different plans from that one plan. You can make different stories from the same values."

"It helped me get more structure into my writing."

"I never used to plan...[now] I've been taught how to structure properly from an author."

"I have learned with Rob where a story comes from ...and what key parts need to be in the story – the 'values'."

Characterisation

"It almost feels as if when I'm writing I'm taking everything from their perspective."

"I spent a lot of my own time writing it because I liked it a lot. I liked writing it because..."

"I wanted to know what happens to the judge, to Jeff because I didn't know because I was just writing it."

Confidence

"I now feel a lot more confident in my writing during this term because I can now properly plan out stories in my head and on a piece of paper... I think that my ability to write has improved massively over this term..."

"When we started this work I did not enjoy writing because I thought it was a bit dull. Now I feel a bit better about writing because I know what I am doing and I feel more confident when writing. Also I feel that the writing is a bit more fun when I know what I'm doing. I have learned how to structure a story and what ingredients need to go into a story to make it interesting for the reader."

"I have changed how I feel about writing after lessons with Rob. Now feel that a lot more has to go into it to get a good end result. I hadn't realised the commitment and devotion writers have to have. My ability to write has improved a lot. I feel more confident and I am able to plan efficiently, leading to good results. I think because my planning has improved and my knowledge of writing has extended, when writing I know what I'm doing which automatically makes me more confident."

Power

"He [Rob] gave me some pointers about sentence structure... how to do the first scene which really helped me write my first chapter."

"This term I have learned from Rob where a story comes from at the start and what key parts need to be in the structure of the story e.g. values. My ideas of structure have improved. This is because I now know when planning how to plan well and do it so it is very detailed. This is so when it comes to write the story, the plan has all of my ideas... My ability to write has been improved in my planning. I have been able to add more detail to my work."

"I write much more writing with more power now because I use more detail. I am also more confident... I'm starting to write more complicated plots with more problems arising to make the story more interesting."

Prolific

"[My writing has] definitely improved really. I feel that I can just put pen to paper and basically make a story."

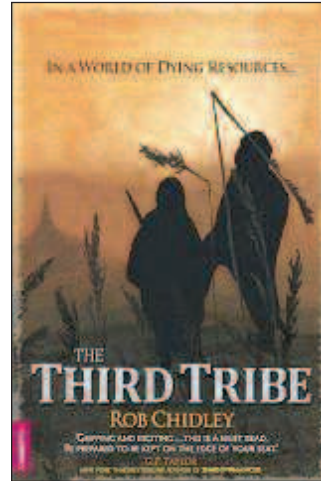
"Before the project I wasn't very confident with writing. I didn't enjoy it very much but after it seemed easier. It flows better and it's more fun. Last night when I was finishing off my short story I found it quite relaxing... I write a lot more now."

"...my vocabulary has increased and this doesn't just apply to English. It will help in future assignments, essays in any subject. Yes this has definitely been an all round improvement. It has shown me I can explore the ways I can write and it has shown me just how much I can produce in such a little time."

Appendix F

ROB CHIDLEY — THE ROLE-MODEL

Chidley, Rob. (2009). *The Third Tribe*. Canaan Press.



Reflection

When I initially applied to be part of the action research team with the IBSC, I really did not think coming from a state school in England, that we would stand much chance of being part of such a prestigious international project. I was both amazed and delighted when we were chosen to be part of the 2009–2010 project. Attending the conference at Lindisfarne College was truly delightful. I met colleagues from around the world, made many friends and felt instantly revitalised and invigorated. There were so many interesting and useful ideas in key note speeches, workshops and discussion groups. It was inspiring to talk to so many informed, passionate and enthusiastic people.

The project itself was particularly welcome because of its focus on improving boys' writing. The title, "How can we help boys become prolific, powerful and confident writers?", immediately engaged my attention and my imagination. Our literacy initiative has, at its heart, the promotion of reading for pleasure and this is working successfully. I knew I needed to progress onto how to improve the boys' writing and this gave me an ideal opportunity to begin. The research I have done at Poole Grammar School with my class of Year 9 (13–14 year old) boys has proved invaluable and will be influential in planning next year's strategy.

Like our reading strategy, I wanted the boys to want to write and write well by the end of the intervention. I think enthusiasm and passion are essential ingredients and I was very lucky to have a young author who could ignite the boys' interest.

I am very grateful to the IBSC for giving me this opportunity to participate in such a worthwhile process. To be part of such a talented group of practitioners across the world has been a humbling and truly inspirational experience. I have learned such a lot from my students, and from my colleagues, and I thank them for this. My special thanks go to Rob for all he has taught me about the craft of writing and for how generously he gave of his time. My thanks also go to Margot Long and Di Laycock. Their help, guidance and support throughout have been so generous and unstinting.

Keep it Real: Writing for the Authentic Audience

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Abstract

A group of Grade 9 boys was chosen to participate in an action research project during their English lessons at Maritzburg College, a boys' secondary school in South Africa. The research question was: How can writing for an authentic audience help boys become prolific, powerful and confident writers? Various writing tasks were completed which focused on the boys writing to a real audience, other than their teacher. The aim of the research project was to ascertain whether boys would write with more fluency, enthusiasm and confidence, and with a more authentic voice if their writing had a real purpose of communication. Previously, the stress of assessment and the seeming lack of purpose for writing other than grading often resulted in a negative response when writing assignments were introduced. With this in mind, real transactional writing was selected as the foundation for many of the tasks so that boys wrote for an authentic audience. Their general enthusiasm for and enjoyment of the various writing tasks and their prolificacy and ease with writing, suggest that the use of the authentic audience can be a powerful inspiration for boys' writing.

Introduction

Writing is a crucial skill across the curriculum and specifically in the English classroom. Assessment, in our national examinations in South Africa, focuses on writing and this, coupled with the importance of literacy for meaningful participation by our students in a 21st century world, was the motivation for giving our writing programme at school a closer look. The chance to focus on boys' writing through an action research project was an opportunity our school could not afford to miss.

In *The Purpose of Boys* Gurian (2009) refers to the importance of "making schools an environment of relevance and purpose for boys and young men" (p. 160). Thomas Newkirk, in *Misreading Masculinity*, (2002), also shares his concern about boys "who are alienated from school itself, who find the reading and writing in schools unrelated to anything that matters to them" (p. xxi). He makes a case for the "low status narratives" (p. xv) enjoyed by boys and challenges schools to consider what constitutes literacy and what does not. As educators belonging to other generations, Newkirk makes us mindful of not sounding "tired and old and crabby" (p.14) and his message is that we should not merely *allow* more freedom but we should be *encouraging* it vigorously because boys will then write with more meaning, purpose and enjoyment.

In *Boy Writers: reclaiming their voices*, Fletcher (2006) also wrote of the importance of engaging the “boy writer”, of giving him more freedom to discover his voice and of finding real and varied audiences for his writing. He gives the responsibility to educators for assisting boys in starting to see themselves as writers. In calling for the reclamation of their voices, he encourages the reinforcement of identity through their writing.

The focus in the literature on the importance of making boys’ writing meaningful and purposeful made a deep impression, and I realised that I needed to apply these core writing values to our microcosm at Maritzburg College. Our writing classrooms needed to become areas where the boys could see the need, relevance and purpose of learning to write more effectively and confidently. With Gurian’s, Newkirk’s and Fletcher’s principles (and common sense approaches) foremost in my mind, I began to explore the research question: *How can writing for an authentic audience help boys become more prolific, powerful and confident as writers?* My intention was to evaluate the impact of using real audiences for the boys’ writing tasks, in order to establish whether the boys would find themselves more engaged in the writing activity and whether their voices would emerge naturally when they focused on the audience and the purpose of their communication.

As a member of the IBSC’s action research programme, an action research approach to my study was mandated. However, it was still necessary for me to have a personal conviction that action research was the most appropriate approach to investigate my research question. Upon reading around the topic of action research, it soon became apparent that this research approach was the ideal vehicle to analyse the effect of using an authentic audience for the boys’ writing at our school and to observe the influence of various writing tasks on their confidence, power and prolificacy. Calhoun (1994) states, “Action research is a fancy way of saying let’s study what’s happening at our school and decide how to make it a better place” (p. 1), whilst Evans (2002) emphasises the need for teachers to be engaged in “reflective practice” (p. 19) as this encourages the identification of areas requiring improvement. Walker (1996) adds that action research is always a “process of becoming” and that it provides an opportunity for “formation and transformation” (p. 58). She explains how it calls for scrutiny into what one is doing as a teacher and “who one can become” (p. 58).

The Research Question

A number of terms require explication in order to investigate my research question: *How can writing for an authentic audience help boys become more prolific, powerful and confident as writers?*

Authentic Audience: For the purpose of this project, an authentic audience refers to people other than the teacher who assesses the boys’ work. These people may have a particular interest in what the boys wish to communicate and on the other hand, they may have little desire to be part of the communication transaction. The various writing tasks target diverse audiences with very different relationships with the boys. This encourages them to focus on their audience and the real situation which guides their content, style and diction. Kellner (1990) suggests that using an authentic audience “helps students see themselves as authors” (p. 71) and also inspires them to invest more effort in their writing. Similarly, Gurian (2009) states that “boys have a natural drive to be purposeful” (p. 58), and transactional writing for a real audience fulfils this need.

Prolific: quantity and quality: With regard to the research question, “prolific” suggests the frequency and quantity of the boys’ writing. However, it is important that quality of writing is not compromised in trying to produce prolific writing. Prolific thus also hinges on motivation and an enthusiasm to write. For writing to be regarded as prolific, it needs to be intrinsically motivated by the boys; otherwise it is a teacher-driven task and cannot be described as prolific. Prolific suggests a desire to write, a fluency and a spontaneity. Most of the writing tasks for this research project had no limit regarding the length and boys could select what they would like to write about. The importance of freedom and personal choice is promoted by the research findings into boys’ writing by Newkirk (2002), Fletcher (2006) and Daly (2002).

Angelillo, in *A Fresh Approach to Teaching Punctuation* (2002), argues for frequent writing and a quest for accuracy if progress is to be made. She explains how students cannot become adept at writing if they write infrequently and do not strive for clarity. So, as much as boys were encouraged to write prolifically, the emphasis was also on editing and re-writing so that the audience received a sound final product of which the boys approved.

Powerful: personal meaning: “Powerful”, in the context of this project, implies writing which is meaningful to the writer. It is writing in which a boy is engaged and with which he is satisfied that it has effectively conveyed his intention and meaning. For the writing to be powerful, it requires that he is comfortable with his voice. Powerful also suggests an ownership of the writing. It is writing of which the writer is proud and which he regards as conveying and valuing his ideas effectively.

Confident: motivated competence: The term, ‘confident’, suggests an attitude of willingness, a sense of competence and a positive attitude towards writing. Peter Elbow, in *Writing with Power* (1998), alludes to the confidence and fluency which emerge from prolific writing. He states that the aspects of confident and prolific writing are inextricably bound because “frequent... writing exercises help you learn to simply get on with it and not be held back by worries about whether these words are good words or right words”(p. 14).

Research Context

Maritzburg College draws 1200 students from diverse backgrounds and has a proud heritage of academic, sporting and cultural excellence. While the school has a sound record of academic achievement, the English department identified boys’ writing as an area which needed particular focus. Many boys seemed to feel inadequate, bored or stressed when some writing tasks were prescribed, and failed to see a real value in completing the tasks effectively.

I discussed the outline of the project with the Head of Academics and my English teaching colleagues at our school. I informed the selected boys, and their parents, of my aims and intentions in conducting the action research project. The parents responded positively by returning their consent forms promptly. All parties approached were unanimous in their enthusiasm and their interest and support continued throughout the project.

My sample group for the Action Research project consisted of thirty grade 9 boys who were in a streamed class for general academic achievement but were not necessarily the top stream for English. Their abilities for the subject varied considerably even though they were all above average.

The Intervention

The need to find different audiences to receive the boys' writing necessitated various writing tasks. This was advantageous as they experimented with different registers, intentions, styles and diction; and this variety maintained the boys' interest as new demands were placed on them when a different authentic audience was targeted. A constant was that each task encouraged them to write as themselves.

In order to address the common complaint of the boys that they found beginning a piece difficult, I opted to begin with journal writing. The idea was that it would encourage a flow of thoughts as no one, other than themselves as older boys, would read their work. They were encouraged to include photographs, snippets from school newsletters and newspapers, ticket stubs from movies, notes from friends – anything that they felt would enhance their 'memory bank'. The emphasis was on personalising their work and encouraging enjoyment of the task and an investment of self. The boys wrote in private journals about twice a week and this writing was uncorrected and for their eyes only. The intention was to develop the boys' reflective, fluent writing in a stress-free environment.

After a few weeks, some boys lost motivation and so teacher prompts were introduced. All the boys agreed that they enjoyed the prompts and found them beneficial. A choice of prompts was usually given. On the final day of the school's academic year, prompts such as best movie, favourite song, closest friends, best mantra/inspirational saying, and "where I want to be in Grade 12", were included and generated lots of interest and mirth. These journals were placed in individually sealed envelopes and placed in a box which was sealed with fanfare as their journals will be returned to them in Grade 12, their final school year.

Another "authentic audience" was created when our school embarked on a major strategic planning exercise and the Headmaster wanted input from the boys. I volunteered the English Department's help and each grade was involved in various authentic tasks. The sample group of Grade 9 boys drafted questionnaires in groups. Through class discussion the best questions were selected and these were carefully worded with cognisance taken of the type of answer that would be elicited. These were then typed up as a single questionnaire to be given to the Grade 8's to answer. The results from the Grade 8's were analysed by the sample group and then collated as a point-form summary for the Headmaster. The audience for this task were the Grade 8's and the Headmaster, and the questionnaire and report demanded very different registers.

Following on from this was an e-mail the boys wrote to peers at Westlake Boys' High School in Auckland. We thought it would be an interesting exercise to write to boys of a similar age in another country to enquire about their school, interests and country. The initial letter was more formal and a copy was sent to me for assessment purposes.

I encouraged the class to participate in the Cancer all-night relay. In this event, members of a team ensure that someone is always walking in support of cancer sufferers and their families, and money is raised through sponsorship for Cancer research. In our large tent, numerous card games were played to keep everyone awake and the class journal was passed around for those who were keen to write in it. The evening, while building class spirit and encouraging fun, also proved to be a very moving experience. Some boys wrote a number of entries and others chose not to write. The entries ranged from the frivolous to more tender writing.

After a number of writing tasks had been completed and confidence seemed high, I decided to include a task which would require the boys to write formally. In order to target a more formal audience, boys were asked to identify a business which they felt warranted either censure or praise. They were given the vacation to select a business and an issue, and they had to find out any relevant details. They used the school's postal address but not the name of the school. This ensured that replies would come to school. When replies were received, boys read them to the class and their peers discussed the tone of each letter and its effectiveness.

Coupled with the desire to encourage writing, was the need to promote reading. The newly-revamped media centre provided the ideal opportunity. The boys wrote book reviews on their best read of the year. They were given coloured cardboard and free rein to present their review in as aesthetically pleasing way as possible for display to celebrate the opening of the new media centre.

The undisputed highlight of the action research project was the task of writing to girls at our local schools. All grade 9 teachers were involved and, through collaboration with teachers at the girls' schools, boys were paired with a 'writing buddy'.

Various short pieces were written for sharing with the class and the boys proved to be an appreciative and supportive audience. The writing tasks for the authentic audience proved to be intensive as examinations were looming and we needed to complete the syllabus. The boys were outstanding in committing themselves to the action research tasks and never wavered in their co-operation. Their support of one another was also exemplary.

Data Collection

The use of a variety of data collection techniques was designed to enhance the validity of the research findings.

The collecting of data included three questionnaires to monitor the boys' responses. These were staggered through the research process and guided the interventions. The boys were given their first questionnaire to gauge their attitude to, and opinion of, writing. This was followed by two other surveys during and after the various writing task to monitor their change in attitude (or lack thereof).

Common ideas emanated from the various surveys and the discussion of data relies heavily on the boys' reflections and comments. Their strong voices and input guided the research process and will influence my approach to boys and their writing in the new academic year.

Interviews with boys in the sample group were also conducted, as well as class discussions. Photographs and video footage were also taken. A teacher journal was kept for purposes of reflection and to monitor progress and activities.

Results and Discussion

The boys in this Grade 9 group had a positive work ethic and were ambitious regarding their academic achievement. After reading their comments in the first survey, I was concerned that the majority expressed anxiety about writing. They concurred that they found it difficult to get going on a task as they were so intent on doing well and this tension often made the experience daunting. Four respondents said they enjoyed writing and felt confident while the others expressed some level of anxiety. Many boys commented that they took far more care over their work as they knew a real person would be reading their writing. This drafting was self-motivated and they decided when their writing was the final draft.

The journal writing task was successful in promoting more prolific writing and the frequency with which they wrote helped them write more fluently. This fluency contributed to their growth in confidence as settling down to write was not a formal exercise but a reflective one from which they would benefit as older boys when they would be the audience. This writing task encouraged the emergence of their own voice under stress-free conditions, and it seemed that frequency of writing helps to remove the barrier of that awkward beginning. It was a case of practice making the writing process less daunting.

The authentic audience of a more mature self inspired most boys to write prolifically and confidently. Five out of the group of 30 stated that they did not enjoy writing in their journals, while 3 of the 5 stated that even though they found it an effort as they sometimes felt lethargic, they knew that in Grade 12 they would be glad that they had. Boys were given class time in which to update their journals and they were encouraged to write more at home. Ten boys said that they often wrote in their journals at home, 5 said that they had good intentions but struggled to find the time, and the remaining 15 said they did not choose to write more at home. In considering these results, I will continue to make writing at home optional, as I do not want the writing to become a chore. I believe writing in their journals twice a week, for five to ten minutes, is sufficient as this limited time encourages a fast flow of ideas rather than the labour and frustration of trying to find things to say. I used optional teacher prompts only in the last few weeks of the project and this inspired the boys. I will use them from the beginning at regular intervals with my next group.

The e-mail to peers at Westlake Boys' High served an interesting purpose as boys found out about the lives of peers in another country. Some boys were disappointed as they did not receive replies to their e-mails but understood that this is the reality of writing to people. Some boys received replies and continued their 'pen-pal' relationship using *Facebook*. It is significant that no boy asked for his grade for this piece of writing which could suggest that the purpose of the e-mail superseded the concern for a good grade. This was very positive as the group had tended to suffer from assessment anxiety as conveyed in their initial questionnaire.

The class journal kept during the Cancer Relay encouraged boys to read and write entries without any concern for assessment. Participation in writing in the journal was voluntary and five boys chose not to write anything. The understanding was that we were free to read what other people had written and I also participated as a writer. The writing varied from the humorous to the heartfelt as the event was sociable as well as moving. It was an event which drew the group together and the class journal served as a fitting reminder of the night spent in cold conditions in support of Cancer sufferers. Most boys found it easy to write as the situation was informal and they were not obliged to write. Some boys chose to write a number of entries.

The formal letter writing exercise to businesses, as chosen by the boys, proved to be a valuable task as the replies taught the boys so much and their observations and comments were impressive. Some did not receive replies but accepted this as they understood that the value in writing to someone real had made them focus and write more easily. This proved to be a stimulating task which produced excellent work from the boys. They expressed themselves with such confidence and clarity. Their writing was powerful in that they showed real understanding in executing the written task. Their letters were also used for assessment and again this proved secondary to the task at hand.

The librarians were delighted as they find peer recommendations effective in encouraging boys to read and the boys were proud to offer their work for display. Assessment was achieved unobtrusively. This task proved to be valuable and meaningful and similar tasks will be pursued in the future, perhaps incorporating the city library.

The letter writing to girls' schools encouraged the prolific aspect of the action research project. There was great enthusiasm from our sister schools and we were inundated with willing respondents. So as not to disappoint any of the schools, my sample group and one other class had to write to two girls each as we were over-subscribed! Needless to say, they were delighted and did not find writing two letters a chore even when the replies arrived and they then had to write two different responses. This writing task really encouraged quantity and quality in writing as letters continued to flow between the schools. It is interesting that many continued to write "old fashioned" letters rather than communicating electronically. A positive aspect is that some pairs continued to maintain contact through some form of writing after the initial writing project had run its course.

The boys' voices emerged strongly in the first survey, expressing a desire for more freedom in the time they were given for writing tasks, more choice in topics and free rein when it came to word count for assignments. These were issues that needed to be addressed and I encouraged the boys to exercise their freedom in all the remaining writing tasks. Assignments were given broad time frames, no word count was recommended and the content of their pieces was self-directed, as the only factor that they had to consider was their audience.

The use of an authentic audience for all the writing tasks had an extremely positive impact on all the boys. The majority commented on how they had found the writing process easier as they were writing to a specific, real person and how much they had enjoyed their various writing assignments. Some comments which reflected the views of many are: *"It made me write about what I really felt"*, *"It has opened up my writing,"* *"It made writing easier,"* *"When you have an audience you want to put more of yourself into it"*, *"I took more care and planned properly"*, and *"It made me concentrate more which made my writing better"*. It was encouraging to note that many boys referred to applying more thought and effort to their work yet finding the writing process easier. This suggests a development of self-confidence and an affirmation of their commitment, ability and interest. An exciting aspect of this project was that with the development in confidence came the stronger personal voice and with that came enjoyment, satisfaction and a sense of achievement.

The findings indicated that the chosen intervention of using various authentic audiences did encourage the boys to write with more confidence, purpose and power and more prolifically. Some selected comments reflect the general trend of their responses:

"I actually received replies so this is not, well, boring school work, it's fun and exciting to see your REAL reply."

"Writing for an audience ... how exciting is that! Writing is great!"

"Seeing purpose to what we are doing has inspired me to improve my writing."

"I actually looked forward to writing as it was so exciting ... because we were writing to someone who would reply to us. Waiting for the replies and reading them is really interesting and exciting."

In the pre-survey most boys referred to anxiety when they were asked to complete a writing task. In the post survey, it was significant that so many of them used the same adjectives to describe their attitudes to writing tasks. These were: "exciting" (22 boys), "fun" (11 boys), and "enjoyable" (12 boys). Four boys said they sometimes felt nervous but that this was not the same level of anxiety that they had previously felt.

Confidence was a factor most boys referred to and one expressed this succinctly, *"I feel more confident in my ability."* The ease with which they began to write was striking. This ease seems to be linked to prolific writing as the more they wrote the less they grappled with choosing words and selecting ideas. The sense of purpose they felt in writing to real people neutralised their previous feelings of anxiety regarding their writing. One of the most significant findings was how, when boys saw a greater purpose to their writing, their focus on assessment disappeared. They saw a real purpose and value to their writing rather than merely trying to achieve a good grade. One boy commented, *"This isn't just a piece of writing for marks, another real person is to receive and possibly reply to this piece of writing which I have taken the time to compose."* The word "compose" is also significant as it suggests effort and pride and these features were obvious in the boys' executions of the various tasks.

Many boys commented on how, as they wrote more and became more confident, they enjoyed extending themselves and trying new ideas and techniques of writing. A representative response from one boy was, *"I have ventured out and have tried new ways of writing"*, while another stated, *"I have become more enthusiastic, confident, fluent and I'm willing to take risks in my writing."*

The group became very motivated and seemed to revel in the expectations that an authentic audience placed on them. They re-drafted their work as often as they felt they needed to, which was more often than I would have expected, and took great care in the presentation of their work. They valued their writing and the relationship they were building with their audience and this motivated their meaningful and competent writing. Said one boy, *"I don't feel like it is a burden anymore. I now look forward to it and I feel excited when we have the opportunity to write"*, while another indicated, *"I have had a drastic change in attitude as I am much more positive."*

The research findings suggest that nothing teaches the appropriate use of language, diction, style and content quite like a real transactional writing situation. To see boys totally submerging themselves in writing and giving of their effort so freely, confidently and happily has been a highlight in my teaching career. The boys' responses revealed that when boys see purpose and value

in their work, there is no limit to the commitment and work ethic they display. This level of engagement and their acknowledgement of their enjoyment and improved writing skills made their writing more powerful. Voicing the sentiments of many other participants, one boy concluded, *"I feel more enthusiastic. My attitude has changed most in that I look forward to the challenge of writing."*

Coupled with the notable positive attitude and motivation amongst the boys, came a fluency which encouraged more prolific writing. The journal writing and the e-mail to Westlake encouraged some boys to write more content and more frequently but it was the letter writing to girls which really sparked this aspect of their writing. The boys recommended that this task be introduced early in the school year so that the letter writing could continue for the whole academic year. They seemed charmed by the 'old fashioned' quality of letter writing and many inserted their first replies to their letters into their journals.

We had a relatively short time frame to complete our action research project and I was delighted with how much the boys were able to achieve. *"I have never written this much in my life and it's been so much fun!"* They embraced the writing project without neglecting their other work and were inspiring as a sample group. They took ownership of the project and their input was enormous. The confidence, motivation and powerful writing which they developed through using an authentic audience spilled over into their other writing in the classroom. One boy's enthusiasm is evident in his comment, *"Last year I dreaded 'The Essay'! This has changed ... I enjoy writing, every last bit of it! It is exciting and nerve-wracking, wonderful!"* Another reinforced this notion and said, *"I have enjoyed writing more and more and want to write more than ever."* Another boy used the plural "we" to voice what he perceived as the class's attitude to the writing tasks before personalising his reaction, *"We enjoyed this year's writing - everything, and there was lots and lots! We learned so much. Phenomenal! My writing has gone from strength to strength."*

The various tasks encouraged boys to write so differently as they had to consider their differing audiences and this honed many writing skills. They were challenged and yet they all commented that having a particular audience in mind made the task easier. Their confidence certainly grew and their writing was powerful as they gave so much of themselves and their voices gained clarity and self-assuredness. It is difficult to measure accurately if their writing improved in the sense of the craft and techniques of the writing. However, it appeared to do so because their attitude changed and their confidence grew so much. This could suggest that the enthusiasm and confidence grew because of their improved skills.

Implications for Practice

The joy of working with boys engaged in their tasks and revelling in the purpose will continue to inspire me as I explore what else I can do to engage them in all aspects of the curriculum. The impact that engagement had on boys' motivation to write was profound. It appears that enabling boys to become involved in tasks which are meaningful to them has a deep impact on their level of engagement and ownership of writing and learning.

It was interesting that they tended to follow the usual time frames and word counts for tasks but they enjoyed the freedom of choice and this did not impact negatively in any way on me and the deadlines to which I had to work. Their desire for fewer constraints will certainly be in the forefront

of my mind as my colleagues and I plan the curriculum for the next academic year. This freedom will surely encourage their confidence as they assume responsibility for the decisions they make?

I would hope, having enjoyed such a positive learning experience through this action research project, that I will continue to engage in identifying areas which require small-scale intervention as advocated by Cohen & Manion (1980).

While this project looked at using an authentic audience to enable boys to write with purpose, meaning and confidence as themselves, I am aware that for each task they have written about what they know and from their own perspectives of self. However, given more time, writing for an authentic audience can explore fantasy, other boundaries and diverse narratives. A possible task would be the writing of a children's story or comic/graphic story to be read to a primary school group. The exciting part of using an authentic audience for some writing tasks in the school curriculum, is the various demands it place on the writer. The fresh challenge seems to be an aspect which motivates boys. The possibilities are indeed endless...

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Reflection

Having the opportunity to conduct action research under the auspices of the International Boys' Schools Coalition was an invaluable privilege. I have learnt so much from the collaboration with teachers from around the world and have valued the input from them and our mentors. It has been a dynamic process as the learning has been exciting, demanding and profound.

The project built a close bond between boys and teacher and I was touched by the gratitude they expressed in being selected as the sample group. I was encouraged by the attitude of all my colleagues as they so often tried tasks we had done and offered advice and showed genuine interest. Many have expressed a desire to conduct informal action research projects in our school to try to make our classrooms more relevant and exciting for the boys we teach. Action research is certainly the ideal medium for learning about our classrooms, the boys we teach and ourselves. It truly makes teaching 'work in progress'.

I will continue to explore the use of the authentic audience as it has certainly generated enthusiasm from the boys and has had a positive impact on the quality of their work, in terms of their attitude to writing and their confidence in the value of their authentic voice. I know that this experience has been life-changing for me as a teacher and I am confident that my involvement will have a positive impact on my school in the years to come.

Anonymity and the Effects on Boys' Writing

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Abstract

This action research project focuses on the impact of anonymity on boys' writing, and more specifically, attempts to determine whether anonymity allows them to become more powerful, prolific and confident writers. A group of ten boys from a year nine class was surveyed to reveal initially what they liked or disliked about writing, how they felt about expressing feelings in their writing and what they thought would be effective in helping them to become more powerful, prolific and confident writers. Findings led to the creation of a wiki where the boys were able to submit responses anonymously to a series of statements and read anonymous feedback on their writing from their peers. Comparing the initial writing sample with the anonymous submissions, the pre-surveys and post-surveys, the nature of the feedback given and the responses from participants during individual discussion, it was found that, to some extent, anonymity did lead boys to feel more confident and powerful in their writing and encouraged them to write more prolifically.

Introduction

In approaching this project, there were important questions to consider: whom to target, when to target them, why to target them and how to target them. Most statistics support the forecast of a continued growth of the gap in achievement in writing-based assessments between girls and boys in New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2007). In light of this national consensus and taking into account that as teachers of writing we should create an environment where boys feel comfortable about writing (Fletcher, 2006), a strategy is needed to engage boys in writing which is non-threatening and constructive.

Increasingly, there is a feeling among teachers that teaching is becoming more focussed on writing for assessment, and that the idea of writing for writing's sake is becoming a secondary objective. In New Zealand secondary schools writing is taught, particularly at senior levels, for the purpose of gaining academic credits. While this is undoubtedly essential, there is little or no room to explore writing as an authentic, organic medium of expression by virtue of the fact that curriculum programmes are structured rigidly in order to get students through the content required for examinations. However, in the junior school curriculum (years 9 and 10) there is more scope to explore writing for writing's sake. The latitude afforded to classroom teachers is only as limited as their imagination.

Many boys say they simply do not enjoy writing and do not write outside the classroom. They view it as laborious, tedious and pointless in terms of mechanics and subject. However, in the past decade, with the revolutions in technology, boys are writing more often than they think. Social networking sites, instant messaging, text messaging and blogging are all legitimate forms of communication which require the participant to generate an idea and communicate it in written form. When involved in a conversation or discussion with friends or acquaintances using any one of the above technologies, students can and do spend hours at a time writing. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1991) describes a “flow zone” whereby a learning environment is created where a student becomes totally engaged. The flow zone is entered when the learner’s ability corresponds to the task. Therefore, it seems that modern technologies and the ability to communicate via them are crucial in getting students into the flow zone.

Anonymity and protecting students’ identity is crucial to this research. While it is impractical for assessment and day-to-day writing scenarios within the classroom, using it in an attempt to have boys write for writing’s sake can prove very effective. By using anonymity, participants in a similar study “vigorously expressed their opinions, disagreements and experiences” (Knox-Quinn, 1995) and were given a forum for honest expression without having to engage with an entire class and teacher.

But writing must have an audience and for this research the audience is their peers. Students’ individual, private day-to-day writing is not intended for a teacher but most likely for their peers. Taking this into consideration, and also the fact that writing needs a purpose, in this case encouraging boys to become powerful, prolific and confident writers, establishing peer feedback is critical. Peer review can emphasise the social nature of language, thought, writing, and learning (Zhu, cited in Lu & Bol, 2007) and provide reinforcement that “learning is not an individual secluded activity, but rather a cognitive activity that occurs in, and is mediated by, social interaction” (Vygotsky, cited in Lu & Bol, 2007). By taking this approach in my research, I aimed to allow students to construct knowledge through social sharing and interaction.

Taking the idea of anonymity in the boys’ writing one step further, anonymous peer review encourages more critical feedback because participants are free from social pressure and interpersonal factors (Bornstein, cited in Lu & Bol, 2007). The counter-argument is that participants in anonymous peer review exert less physical effort because there is no accountability for the quality or quantity of the feedback (Kerr & Bruun, cited in Lu & Bol, 2007). However, the findings of Lu and Bol’s research support this focus on anonymous peer review for promoting critical feedback and improving writing performance. There is evidence to support the notion that peer review leads not only to the improvement of the reviewed writer’s work but also the reviewer’s work. Kerr, Park and Domazlicky (1995) suggest that students who take a critical approach when reading and scoring peers’ work are likely to be more critical of their own work, and thus create improved writing.

Research Context

Lindisfarne College is an independent boys' school in Hawke's Bay, New Zealand. It has 494 students, approximately half of whom are boarders. It is a strongly traditional boys' school with a focus on four cornerstones of personal development: academic, cultural, sporting and spiritual.

Research Methodology

Teachers should be constantly involved in reflective practice; preparing and delivering lessons, and evaluating them for effectiveness on a day-to-day basis. The observations and evidence gathered from reflection are used to make informed decisions to alter practice and consequently enhance the learning of students. Put simply, teachers are involved in action research every day. Mills (2007) promotes the merits of Action Research as an opportunity to "take action and effect positive educational change in the specific school environment that was studied" (p. 4). This is what all teachers strive for: effecting positive change for their students. Action Research is conducted by the teacher for the teacher and thus the findings are relevant, effective and meaningful for the teacher (Mills, 2007). However, the benefits of undertaking Action Research are significant for the students themselves. As they are the subject of the research and the findings of it are the result of their participation, the outcomes (change in teacher practice) can be directly translated into improved student learning.

Research Methods

THE INTERVENTION

The intervention strategy in this study was the use of anonymity, but also came to include the use of technology as a means through which to encourage the students to become powerful, prolific and confident writers. The boys used anonymity in both their written submissions and their feedback on their peers' work.

THE SAMPLE

The research group was made up of ten boys, although initially more boys had signed up. However, due to problems with their access to computers, five students withdrew from the project. The ten boys were all from one year nine class. They were selected using two criteria. Some boys chose to volunteer for the project and others, as a result of their comments (either displaying very positive or very negative attitudes towards writing) on the pre-action survey, were chosen following a discussion with me.

Each student was given a 'name' under which to submit work, e.g., Student A or Student B. A page was created on the *LFCWriters* wiki space for each of the participants. Topics were posted onto the students' pages, initially by me as the researcher but then by students who made their own choices as to what they would write about. Each week students would submit a piece of writing to their wiki page as well as comment on the submissions of other students.

DATA COLLECTION

Using qualitative data collection was the key to understanding the impact of the action. Data were collected in several ways in keeping with the notion of triangulation, the use of multiple sources of data (Mills, 2007), for validity of results. Collection methods included:

- **Surveys.** The pre-action survey sought to elicit boys' attitudes to writing, the importance they place on writing, things they find difficult about or when writing and their opinion on what would help them feel more at ease with writing. The post-action survey was a means by which to establish how effective they perceived the intervention of anonymity to be in terms of confirming or changing their attitudes to, effort in and frequency of writing.
- **Personal written exercises prior to the action being undertaken.** These were used to obtain a baseline for each of the participant's writing. Some aspects that were looked at were topic choice, quantity, accuracy and sincerity. The written pieces submitted in the course of the action research were also examined. These submissions were evaluated for change in the aspects which were considered in the pre-action pieces.
- **Observation of students.** When students were required to write during school time (most of the writing was done outside school hours) I observed them, paying particular attention to their behaviour and manner as they went about the task.
- **Focus group discussions and individual interviews.** These two methods focussed on the students' opinions of the action. The responses then allowed me to reflect and use their comments and suggestions when creating the next writing task.

Results

Each of the three distinct phases of the research produced key findings relevant to the action research project as a whole.

In the pre-action survey a trend emerged that showed that although students recognised the importance of writing as a skill, no student liked to write outside school. This suggested that students see writing as a formal process and that writing on social networking sites, text messaging and instant messaging are not seen as legitimate forms of writing. This conclusion was confirmed by the answers of students who said they found marking schedules, process writing and rewards as the most helpful things when asked to write. Nearly all students predicted that anonymity would increase the amount they would write and allow them to write more honestly and, to some extent, more creatively. All students expressed interest and confidence in being asked to comment on their peers' writing.

The boys also completed a questionnaire which asked them to provide their understanding of what it means to be a) a powerful writer, b) a confident writer and c) a prolific writer. Nearly all students wrote that a confident writer is one who is able to be honest in their writing. The response from Student M neatly summarises the myriad of ideas which were offered and which was adopted as the group's working definition. He wrote that *"A confident writer has the power to harness their ideas and feelings and publicly express them without embarrassment or fear."*

The boys had very different views on what constitutes a powerful writer. A powerful writer was deemed to be one who can explain his ideas in words in a way which *“lots of people can understand.”* For thirteen-year old boys, a powerful writer is also someone who can write persuasively, or can write using *“lots of language techniques”* or can write *“using emotions”*. He is someone who *“when people read their work respond to it, believe it and act on it.”* The one common comment was that a powerful writer will command a reader’s attention. This, the group decided, was measured by all the criteria stated above. One student commented that truly powerful people will write more powerfully because they have more to lose or gain.

With regard to what the boys understand a prolific writer to be, most responses involved the idea of writing often. Variations on this response included thoughts about having time and space to write, being an efficient writer who is fluent, fast and effective. Most boys believed that if you were a confident writer, and to a lesser extent a powerful writer, you were more likely to be a prolific writer.

PRE-ACTION WRITING

The students were asked to write for me, their English teacher, on the topic “A favourite memory”. The instructions were simple but not overly directive. They were to write approximately 200 words, consider their choice of vocabulary and structure their work appropriately. Students were told they would be marked on their ideas, their language, their writing conventions and structure. Most students handed in a fairly predictable piece of writing. Many fictionalised their piece while others recounted a true experience. The information I gained from this exercise was important. It showed me that the majority of boys knew how to write very clearly structured pieces which were accurate in spelling and punctuation but that most wrote stories that were pedestrian. Most pieces were typical of what a student expects a teacher wants. There were similes, metaphors and alliteration throughout but no real feeling or sense of ownership in the piece which, as the boys themselves admitted in focus group discussions, highlighted an indifference to the topic. The students said they much preferred to be able to choose their own writing topic as this meant the writing was “more us”. There was a consensus in the group that they wrote what they thought I wanted rather than what they *could* write. The reason for this was simple: I was marking it.

One student I observed was so disengaged that in the hour given to complete the piece he attempted the task three times, each time scribbling out what he had written and finally submitting a piece which was five lines long and barely decipherable. When questioned on this he said that the topic was “dumb”; he preferred making up his own stories and by the end of the hour his hand was sore so he “gave up.”

These three pieces of pre-action evidence highlighted a need for boys to have ownership of their work, to be allowed to choose what they write about, to have an audience other than a teacher and to be allowed to comment on the work of others as well as receive feedback on their own work from their peers. Along with this, the evidence suggested that being able to use computers as opposed to pen and paper would make writing more appealing and that they in turn would be more open to writing more frequently.

WRITING ON THE WIKI AND POST-ACTION RESPONSES

Taking the findings of the pre-action data, the boys' first writing task was to respond to "*If I Could Change Anything About Myself...*" They were not given any choice in the topic but were allowed to complete it at home in their own time. This first sample of writing proved interesting. Some students wrote a lot, others wrote a little, but all completed the task on time. Allowing students to give unguided feedback on their peers' work offered some interesting insights. Some feedback focussed on the content, while others preferred to focus on the form. Students said they felt unsure of what was expected of them as critics but enjoyed the chance to have their say. As a result, guidelines were established for their peer review. Boys were to comment not only on *what* was written but also *how* it was written. With these guidelines in place, the feedback became a dynamic part of the research project.

The second writing topic was again chosen by me and the boys all managed to write more than they had the first time around. What was most surprising was the quantity of the feedback that the students gave each other in this second cycle. Not only did the boys read the feedback from their peers but they responded to any points raised in it which they felt were unclear, unfair or just interesting. Often, the written feedback portion of the wiki page was more developed, more honest and more powerful than the piece it was all written for. In some instances the pages turned into academically oriented social networking sites.

From the third submission on, the students were allowed to choose their topics. I found that these submissions all followed a similar trend. The boys were writing openly and prolifically on their self-chosen topics and the feedback which was given was certainly, at times, powerful. Observation and discussion revealed that the students felt more compelled to "do a good job" on their own topic and felt that they could be more interesting and creative with their language and content when writing about something that engaged them. The assertion from Knox-Quinn (2005) that anonymity provides the "safety some students seemed to need in order to suspend their assumptions in the classroom environment" and can therefore "be used to propel a class beyond the minimization-of-differences stage of ethnocentrism" was very obvious in this aspect of the research. Boys who often did not interact in the classroom or playground were communicating anonymously with real power and conviction, and on a regular basis. Many students mentioned the fact that anonymity meant that they could be more open in their online discussion, more truthful in opinion pieces and confident in the fact that other students could not mock or judge them. Reading between the lines, it can be inferred that the students liked the fact the audience could not bring preconceptions to writing. One student felt that anonymity did not add anything to his writing, as he is naturally confident and self-assured, but he conceded that he could not see any really negative effects of using anonymity as a tool to encourage boys to write.

It was interesting to observe the students on the occasions when they were writing at school. They would come into the Computer Lab and settle to work quickly. It was amazing to see the speed with which they typed and the force with which they banged the keys. The boys' enjoyment of the written 'tennis' with their anonymous reviewers was apparent. Conversations would invariably start up but all were focussed around the writing site. They would read out the review they disagreed with or ask other students what they thought about a particular piece. The boys would also try to pick which writing belonged to which student. They used their prior knowledge of the students in the research group to analyse the writing in terms of form and content and in this way

were frequently able to identify the author accurately. Indeed, this paralleled Kitao and Seaki's (1992) research which argued that anonymity "seems to add spice and mystery" to peer dialogue.

When the students correctly ascertained the identity of the anonymous writer, the nature of the writing stayed the same but disappointingly, the feedback began to be less constructive. Personal jokes and irrelevant comments started creeping in to the feedback. While none of it was malicious or inappropriate in regards to language or topic, it did begin to distract from the personal writing. When asked about this, the students believed it was because they all knew each other so well that "*it was just like being on Facebook except that [we] had to keep it about the writing.*" By the end of the project, the students felt that commenting on others' work was "*good as long as it was constructive.*" This comment reflects the work of Kerr, Park, & Domazlicky (1995) which raised concerns that peer response/review can generate an uneven quality of feedback. Only one student disliked the peer review aspect because he felt he was being criticised unfairly and would have preferred constructive feedback from a teacher. His comments affirm the concerns raised by Dyrud (2001) that irresponsibility or complacency causes concern for students who feel their peer reviewers display these characteristics. In any further research this would need to be addressed so that all students feel comfortable with the process and understand the benefits of peer review. Teachers would need to make students aware that peer response, in any form (verbal or written) establishes peer authority "to the point that each class member is considered a valued reader" (Teichmann, 1992).

I feel that perhaps it was the nature of the students taking part that led to these conclusions. If, for example, the boys were not from the same class or year group then there would have been more detachment and less of a temptation to interact outside the parameters of the research. Had senior students been the participants of the research then their maturity may have allowed them to remain focussed on the main objective. However, as it was, the boys certainly enjoyed their time writing and responding.

Through the focus group discussion and individual interviews it was also obvious that most boys were more comfortable using the computers than pen and paper. All students admitted that if the project was 'manual' then they probably wouldn't have volunteered for the project. The student who faltered in the baseline essay was able to formulate responses on his wiki page – even when he had no choice about the topic. He said that using a computer is much easier because it's easier to change your work until it "*sounds how you want it to.*" Indeed, this assertion was a common theme in the post-action responses of all boys who took part in the project.

Conclusion

In this project a change was perceptible in the confidence, power and frequency of the participants' writing through the use of anonymity in writing. While this was the focus of the project, the results also suggest real merit in using technology and peer review to achieve the same result.

By using modern technology and allowing students a choice of topic, boys wrote with enthusiasm, passion and honesty – all factors which the group defined as necessary for a confident writer. Using computers as a medium to create their pieces also enabled them to develop their ideas. The frustration caused by writing and re-writing manually with a pen was negated. The group found that they were more inclined to write at length and edit what they had written when using a computer because it didn't become too time consuming and repetitive. Reluctant writers embraced the technology and felt a sense of accomplishment when a piece was completed.

In allowing them to choose their own topics the boys had a sense of ownership over the writing and this created intrinsic interest. This interest and engagement then led to a sincerity and honesty missing from the identifiable baseline essays. Coupling this with anonymity allowed them to express ideas without embarrassment or fear.

While each student's writing was, to an extent, powerful, the most powerful writing was achieved through the use of the anonymous peer review. It was here that boys challenged each other and engaged in debate about the content and form of the writing. The students believed that by doing this anonymously they were more confident and powerful in their writing because they were not swayed by their own previous opinions, prejudices and assumptions about the writer. The change in audience also led to a change in writing. By removing the teacher as the audience and replacing it with their peers, the tone and voice of the writing changed to genuinely reflect the attitudes and values of teenage boys.

Even though anonymity enabled the boys to write frequently and with confidence and power, the nature of the students participating could be an aspect which has skewed the findings. At the outset of this project my intention was to work with senior students from a range of different classes. By using students from the top stream year nine class it is possible to draw the conclusion that their natural ability, willingness to participate and close relationships with each other were all factors in the success of this project.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this research do have some significant implications for teachers. It is apparent that students like to have a choice in what they write about and while this may not be feasible in senior English programmes, it is possible to introduce in junior English programmes. Choice, according to my findings, directly relates to the attitude of the student to writing, which in turn leads to increased confidence and power. By writing on a subject they have chosen, there is motivation for boys to develop their work beyond a rudimentary, pedestrian response. This research also suggests that by changing the audience for students' writing teachers may uncover more authentic writing which reflects the student more accurately in terms of both ability and personality. Using peers to critique work also appears to be a legitimate way to encourage reflection and revision amongst writers.

The fact that in this project the boys were "writing for writing's sake" for no apparent reward or credit, also proves that the combination of anonymity, technology and peer review has the potential to encourage students to *just write*. It is also important for teachers to recognise that students will *just write* and that they (the teachers) should endeavour to include this type of writing in their programmes. Apparently it is not only grades and rewards that motivate students but simply the opportunity to express themselves.

There is never going to be a single answer to the question of boys' writing. There will never be a single initiative that addresses the needs of all boys. But this research clearly highlights that the inherent value of the use of anonymity and peer feedback lies in the benefit it affords boys who are reluctant to write and seek advice from teachers.

As teachers we need to accept that our students live in a world which demands that they use technology. We therefore must be willing to embrace this in our programmes to engage our students. It is a fact that social norms and conventions discourage anonymity (Levmore, 1996). There are very few instances when a student can be totally anonymous – they are always subject to some sort of identification – as someone’s brother, someone’s son, the sportsman, the musician, the maths whiz. Using anonymity allows students to be free of those labels and express themselves in ways which we otherwise may not have thought possible.

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Assessing the Impact of Different Types of Feedback Upon the Confidence of Adolescent Boys as They Write: The Benefits of Praise and Strategy

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Abstract

In this action research project, student motivation and confidence were investigated in relation to writing, and the theoretical lens of Carol Dweck's *'Mindset'* theory provided the vehicle through which to explore how two distinctly different types of feedback impacted upon the success of boys' writing in their English class.

A pre-survey identified that the boys had a strong desire to receive ongoing feedback as part of their writing experience. Amongst a small sample of 23 Year 8 boys, divided into two groups, the use of two contrasting types of feedback, identified as either 'process and praise' type comments or 'product and rubric' feedback, were assessed as the boys completed a unit of work about the Globe Theatre in the time of William Shakespeare.

Data were collected before, during and after the unit of work. The findings suggest that the students who received 'process and praise' feedback for their writing increased their confidence and use of strategy, attained a higher level of achievement for the final assessment, and wrote more prolifically than those students who had only received feedback focused on 'product and rubric'. From the analysis of the data, the results of this action research suggest that providing written feedback which contains both supportive comments and suggestions about strategy, appears to be much more powerful in increasing the self-efficacy and confidence of student writers in contrast to just providing feedback via a marking rubric with a level of attainment (a written mark). In contrast to the 'praise and strategy' feedback, this use of 'rubric and product' feedback appeared to limit student motivation and impact upon increased levels of achievement during later writing attempts. This data suggests that the use of 'praise and strategy feedback' facilitated an increased level of engagement and confidence, which led to a more sophisticated level of writing being achieved by the boys.

Introduction

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Feedback: The return of information about the result of a process or activity; an evaluative response: *asked the students for feedback on the new curriculum.* www.answers.com

Prolific: I have chosen the following definition of the term prolific which alludes to being productive in action.

fecund: intellectually productive; "a prolific writer"; "a fecund imagination"
www.wordnetweb.princeton.edu

Powerful: I particularly like this definition which makes connections with the efficacious completion of a task, which I feel has relevance to the process of writing. Ultimately, we want our students to write with passion, drive and motivation.

effective, effectual, efficacious - producing or capable of producing an intended result or having a striking effect. Collins Essential Online Thesaurus 2nd Edition, 2006.

Confident: I particularly like to think of confidence as being self assured and displaying a high degree of conviction during the writing process.

- 1: *full of conviction: certain; confident of success; confident that conditions will improve*
- 2: *having or showing assurance and self-reliance, a confident young businessman, a confident manner.* www.merriam-webster.com

The Action Research Process and Background Information

By definition, action research is seen as a methodology through which to review, inform and hopefully develop one's own practice, with an increased level of effectiveness. This research project is contextualised using the definition of action research provided by Cohen and Manion (1989), who identify that "action research is small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such intervention" (p. 217). Muhren (2004) defines educational action research as being

inquiry-based research conducted by teachers that follows a process of examining existing practices, implementing new practices, and evaluating the results, leading to an improvement cycle that benefits both students and teachers. Synonyms for action research include practitioner research, teacher research, site-based research, and action science.

This project explores the specific action of providing written feedback in the classroom setting, but more specifically, the action research connects the process of providing feedback in writing with existing research and educational theory completed in other related areas of education. Specifically, this action research examines the level of confidence and achievement that is often attributed to students who gain more strategic and positive feedback as they write. This is aligned with the *Mindset Theory* of Dr Carol Dweck (2006).

At a time where education is trying to understand the different factors that underpin student engagement and success, it makes sense to examine a specific teaching approach and the related student behaviour within the broader learning process, particularly if it has the potential to improve the depth and quality of an individual's work. Investigating the intervention of 'feedback' in writing has relevance to the existing body of educational research about achievement and confidence amongst students, which examined the influence of different types of feedback in other subject areas such as Mathematics (Dweck, 2008; Kamins & Dweck, 1999). As teachers, we have a responsibility to try and develop each individual within our care, ensuring that we provide them with the confidence and belief to undertake any task (in this case writing), with the aim of producing their best work at all times.

Related Literature

In considering the process of writing, one can explore a plethora of different factors that may impact upon the success and confidence of an individual as they put pen to paper, or type their story into a computer.

A large body of research has been conducted in the area of writing, specifically examining the development of motivation and self-regulation, whereby a student has the capacity to complete a written task successfully, while having the passion and confidence to write fluently. Hidi and Boscolo highlight this in their work and identify the study of Schunk and Shwartz (1993) who found that "learners who feel more competent about writing (are) more likely to choose to write, expend effort and persist at writing tasks than students who doubt their capabilities" (2006, p. 149). Importantly this study identifies that providing process goals and progress feedback to the students enhances their transfer of writing strategy use, skill and self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is defined as an individual's belief and personal judgement about their ability to complete a give task (Bandura, 1986). In connecting this to the idea of developing strategy in the writing process, Graham, MacArthur and Fitzgerald also emphasise the need to employ a "framework or a sequence of steps to accomplish demanding assignments" (2007, p. 35). The collective findings from these studies suggest that the action of providing formative feedback to students will enhance their confidence in writing.

Educational research completed in other domains of functioning by Zimmerman (1998) and Zimmerman and Cleary (2006), confirms the relationship that exists between the level of self-efficacy that an individual displays towards a task and the frequency and sophistication of one's self-regulatory behaviour when writing (Harris & Graham, 1996). They examine the connections between belief and the cyclic nature of one's own self-regulation when writing (such as planning, revising and setting goals, etc). Existing research by Pajares and Valiante (1997), also highlights the connection that exists between self-belief and achievement in writing. In summary, heightened self-efficacy and confidence leads to more sophisticated levels of planning and process orientation, which in turn increases the level of confidence displayed by the individual.

Dweck (2006) examines the notion that the “view that you adopt for yourself profoundly affects the way you lead your life” (p.6). She presents the perspective of the *fixed* mindset, where individuals see their qualities as being carved in stone (whereby you feel the need to prove yourself over and over, and worry about the result of your work), and the contrasting *growth* mindset which is

based on the belief that your basic qualities are things that you can cultivate through your efforts...although people may differ in every which way – in their initial talents and aptitudes, interests, or temperaments, everyone can grow or change through application or experience.
(p. 7)

Deserving particular attention here in the context of this writing research is the statement from Dweck, “Why waste your time proving over and over how great you are, when you could be getting better?” (p. 7). Dweck goes on to outline the differences in student learning when they achieve ‘effort and praise’ based feedback as opposed to ‘product or outcome’ based feedback, aligning these types of feedback with the behaviour of the *fixed* and *growth* mindsets respectively. She identifies that students who receive praise are more likely to engage in tasks at a higher level while also continuing to achieve their results because they have acknowledged that their approach to learning can be changed. The action of ‘effort and praise’ based feedback became the main focus of this project, working alongside the existing ‘product or outcome’ based feedback that is commonly used in the classroom environment.

Research Focus

Specifically, the action of providing written feedback is being examined within the middle school classroom. For many years feedback has been a critical component of our day-to-day classroom pedagogy, and an inherent component of the teaching process when students are striving to complete a written task. The purpose of this action research is to ascertain if ‘process and praise’ feedback or ‘product and rubric’ feedback is a more effective as a catalyst during the writing process. Existing research (Ferris, 2003) identifies that students like to receive suggestions when writing which concurs with Beach (1989) who found that students liked receiving comments that explain why their work is good or bad.

This research into writing and the use of written feedback is situational, collaborative, participatory and self-evaluative, whereby teachers are trying to better understand how different approaches to a specific aspect of the teaching and learning process may impact upon the level of confidence and success that these boys attain.

Specifically, the nature of the task investigates the effectiveness of two different approaches towards using feedback within the same group of mixed ability students. The research explores the regular classroom teaching process, looking to ascertain which feedback approach empowers boys to become confident, powerful and prolific young writers. The aim of this is to develop more effective pedagogy to support the writing of boys and their confidence in their own abilities.

In broad terms, this action research explores whether an increased focus on the formative approach and praise for the work completed influences the boys and their level of motivation and achievement in class in contrast to a more traditional and summative approach to feedback.

It is important to note that the decision to focus upon the specific act of *feedback* was initially considered in light of a large meta analysis of educational research (Hattie, 2009) and the theoretical framework of Dweck (2006, 2008). These perspectives were confirmed in the results of pre-task survey which examined the boys' perceptions about writing and the aspects of the writing process that they most enjoy (See Appendix 1).

The Research Question and Methodology

FOCUS QUESTION

How can the use of written feedback help boys to become more confident, powerful and prolific writers in the classroom?

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology drew upon an array of different research protocols, including quantitative surveys and a combination of qualitative processes such as student observation, the collection of work samples, draft writing tasks, examination writing tasks and marking rubrics. In varied combinations, these processes were employed and data were collected at various times during the study. A particularly important component of the methodology was the development of two contrasting writing feedback sheets, each of which contained specific attributes aligned with either 'praise' or 'product' feedback. These are highlighted in the examples included in the body of the research report.

THE SAMPLE OF STUDENTS

Due to the time frame and the need to access a class within the existing curriculum structure at the school, one Year 8 English class was chosen to participate in this action research project towards the end of Term 3 and the commencement of Term 4, 2009. The lesson series involved a large sequence of teaching periods during this time, and examined work covered over a period of approximately 6 weeks in total and approximately 20 periods of teaching time. For the purpose of this action research, the sample of boys was divided into two groups, each of which received one of the two types of written feedback.

The main focus of the study involved 23 Year 8 boys. A valuable part of this process was working with a colleague and collaborative teacher/researcher, Mr Steve Allan, who was the regular class teacher and had an ongoing interest in educational research and the ways in which boys respond to pedagogy in class. The data from the Year 8 group were a mixture of qualitative and quantitative, combined with some reflections from the teacher during the process. Importantly, the action research was completed while the students continued to engage in their daily learning, as part of a topic related to the existing English curriculum.

ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION: PRE-TASK

Specifically, data collected from the Year 8 (pre-task survey, N=23) and the student responses to several key items, confirmed their desire to receive feedback. In brief, these items provided a clear indication about their perception of their writing ability, while also identifying their desire to receive feedback and assistance with strategies to improve their writing. The response to the feedback statement had the highest mean score of all items on the survey. (See selected items presented below).

When I write, I like to have feedback from my teacher. (Mean 92%)

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

I can write well. (Mean 73%)

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

I would like help with strategies that improve my writing. (Mean 73%)

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

The open-ended comments from the students in this pre-task survey (See Appendix 1, items 18, 19 and 20) provided further evidence about the influence of strategy in their work. One boy outlined how he used different strategies such as *“merging ideas together from two different sources and then editing them by moving his ideas around on the computer”*, while another stated that by adopting some strategies suggested by the teacher (such as using a framework and planning key sections), he was able to *“enjoy writing and develop a great story”*, whereby he *“got into it and the words just flowed”*. Another boy highlighted that the teaching strategy of *“getting us to write at the start of every lesson”* was a valuable process that assisted him to write in class.

AN OUTLINE OF THE TASK PROPER

The task involved writing about the life and times of Shakespeare as part of the current topic area that they were studying in class. The Year 8 English class was divided into two sub-groups, ‘praise’ or ‘product’, which then received feedback on their work. Two different rubrics were used to provide written feedback and examples of these are included in the text that follows.

The students studied the period in which Shakespeare lived, looking at key aspects of his plays, and importantly they investigated the Globe Theatre, trying to understand what the experience would be like if they were to attend a ‘live’ performance during this time in history.

A series of lessons were presented in which the boys observed visual footage and PowerPoint displays and examined diagrams of the design of the Globe Theatre, while also studying various extracts from Shakespeare’s plays. Combined with a range of tasks, discussion and ongoing investigation, the teacher provided a range of learning opportunities related to the topic area and encouraged the boys to write reflectively in an ongoing manner as they gathered knowledge and developed their understanding. Over several weeks, this topic area was unpacked through a variety of different classroom activities and writing experiences.



(Examples of picture used in class to stimulate the writing process). Photos by D.Cooper.

After several weeks of teaching, the action research involved the students writing their own narrative in response to the following statement:

You are a wealthy merchant who visits the Globe Theatre. On this specific day you watch a performance of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Write a narrative that portrays your experience.

Students completed this writing task and handed in a draft of their work, which was then marked and returned to them prior to completing another formal writing assessment on this topic area in several weeks' time. As outlined, the students were randomly assigned to one of two groups within the class and received feedback, using either 'process - praise' type comments, or a 'product - rubric' approach. This feedback about the narrative was also unpacked through discussion in the lessons.

A few weeks later, after considerably more contextualisation and coverage of the topic area, the students wrote another essay in their examination which was directly related to the question for which they had recently received feedback. The task was:

Write a response to the following topic. Imagine taking a time machine back to 1600. Describe a visit to the Globe Theatre to watch a Shakespearian production. Write a DIARY ENTRY describing your experience.

This question was similar in focus to the work they had completed in the initial narrative, which subsequently provided a means of comparing how the type of feedback received may have impacted on their writing confidence. The final marks attained here, the different type of feedback provided and the prolific nature of the writing samples were used as a means to try and interpret the difference in achievement between each group, and most importantly, the level of confidence with which the boys had engaged in the process of writing. In examining the responses, the traits of the *fixed* and *growth* mindsets identified by Dweck (2006) were referenced, while the differences that exist between the use of planning and strategy relative to self-efficacy and related self-regulatory behaviours in writing (Harris *et al.*, 1996; Schunk *et al.*, 1993; Graham *et al.*, 2007) were also examined.

SAMPLES OF THE TWO TYPES OF WRITTEN FEEDBACK

The purpose of having two distinct groups of students within the one English class was to try and investigate if there were similarities and differences in the way that the type of written feedback influenced the motivation and behaviour between groups as they worked in class, receiving 'praise and strategy' or 'product and rubric' feedback along the way. The researcher designed the task in order to explore if previous research that had been previously completed in other subject areas (Kamins & Dweck, 1999; Dweck, 2006) possibly influenced the level of confidence and achievement of the boys in the class.

FEEDBACK EXAMPLES

For each of the four selected examples below, I have highlighted the feedback used, with the aim of making the distinction between the two different types clearer. For each example a series of brief annotations are provided.

PRAISE AND PROCESS. EXAMPLE NO.1

Outline of task: you are a wealthy merchant who visits the Globe Theatre. On this specific day, you watch a performance of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Write a narrative which portrays your experience.

Student paints a vivid depiction of London in the early Seventeenth Century using historical facts (e.g. streetscape, transportation and people):

Great reason for going to the Theatre. Add a little more detail about how Southwark looks and smells.

Student is able to describe the Globe Theatre in detail (outside, seating and stage):

This is a good section indeed. You paint a vivid picture. Do not forget to mention the canopy which houses the heave

Note the key words used to provide praise in the text including 'great reason', 'good section' and 'you paint a vivid picture', combined with the strategy suggestions of 'add a little detail about the Southwark looks and smells' and the suggestion 'don't forget to mention the canopy'.

PRAISE AND PROCESS. EXAMPLE NO.2

Student includes reference to Act 1 of *Macbeth* (identifies characters, aspects of plot and use of quotation):

Excellent reference to the play and aspects of performance, though each new speaker (witch) should start on a new line. Student is able to draw the narrative to an abrupt but believable close.

Yes, you really put the brakes on at the end and change the focus of the narrative - well done.

Overall Comment:

This draft is strong and with a bit more attention to detail you should have a strong response ready for the next examination. Keep working hard on that next draft.

Note the keywords used to provide praise: 'excellent reference', 'well done', combined with the ongoing reference to a 'strong response' and the encouragement to 'keep working hard'. Similarly, there are lots of suggestions about strategy including 'start a new line' combined with comments like 'more attention to detail', all of which provide encouragement to the student.

PRODUCT AND RUBRIC. EXAMPLE NO. 3

Marking Criteria for a Visit to the Globe Theatre (Group 1)

Outline of task: you are a wealthy merchant who visits the Globe Theatre. On this specific day, you watch a performance of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Write a narrative which portrays your experience.

Student paints a vivid depiction of London in the early Seventeenth Century using historical facts (e.g. streetscape, transportation and people):

- Underdeveloped
- Reasonable
- Strong.

Student is able to describe the Globe Theatre in detail (outside, seating and stage):

- Underdeveloped
- Reasonable
- Strong.

Although providing feedback via the rubric, the nature of the product focus does not allow for any additional information to be communicated to the student, or the provision of additional suggestions or information.

PRODUCT AND RUBRIC. EXAMPLE NO.4

<p>Student includes reference to Act 1 of <i>Macbeth</i> (identifies characters, aspects of plot and use of quotation):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Underdeveloped • Reasonable • Strong. <p>Student is able to draw the narrative to an abrupt but believable close.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Underdeveloped • Reasonable • Strong. <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-top: 10px;"> <p>Overall Mark out of 10:.....6.....</p> </div>

Similarly, this part of the rubric only provides a fixed indication of achievement and does not provide suggestions for possible improvement. By providing a reference to one of three levels, relative to the writing process and then offering a mark, the nature of feedback is quite restricted.

Analysis of Data

THE STUDENTS

Data were collected at various points in the teaching of the unit, through the pre-task writing survey before commencement, after the collection of the draft writing response and also after the completion of the final written response in the examination. Combined with these key collection points, there were a range of work samples and written examples collected. Combined with this were various comments that they made about the feedback they were receiving in class, all of which provided a combination of both qualitative and quantitative data for analysis.

In the initial analysis of the data from the two groups of students who participated in the research, there were a number of different factors to report that one would suggest are related to the type of feedback received in class, and which importantly, may influence our teaching practice as we seek to develop writing in class.

Of particular interest was the fact that the boys who received the 'praise and strategy' feedback were more prolific in their completion of writing in the assessment task. They wrote more in their responses and appeared more engaged in their work in the lead up to the exam, which would suggest that their increased level of motivation may have impacted upon their ability to write with increased detail and confidence. Analysis of their writing scripts indicated that these students often wrote between half or a whole page more than the students who had received only 'rubric - product' based feedback. Existing research in other subject areas would suggest that may be due to the praise comments being embedded in the feedback (see examples No. 1 and No. 2), combined with the use of strategy, which forms a means of planning their work and giving their writing a framework (Graham et al, 2007) in ongoing writing attempts.

In contrast, the analysis of the group that had only received the 'product-rubric' feedback found that most students had written an acceptable response, but closer examination revealed less detail

or quality, whereby the students just answered the question without expanding their writing. The results suggest that the use of 'product-rubric' feedback (see example No.3 and No.4) needs further consideration and refinement if used in the development of writing amongst boys, while also suggesting that these students may have adopted a *fixed* perception of their writing ability. It was also apparent that the boys who received the 'praise and strategy' feedback provided a more detailed level of contextual understanding, often 'setting up' their writing and providing a clearer structure in their work, which aligns with the work of Schunk and Schwartz (1993).

Qualitative comments from the boys also highlighted their preference for receiving comments in their feedback, which they perceive as being more valuable than marks. Examples of these included:

"Comments are better, telling us what we need to know."

"Comments are more important to learn from rather than the marks. The marks tend to make people worry too much...they should just focus on the quality of the writing and how much detail they put in, instead of being put off by what they got."

"I prefer to receive comments with 'what I'm missing in my responses' and know that I can improve my answer. It is also useful to find out what you are doing well."

These responses from the students highlight a preference for receiving comments and strategy suggestions, as they informed their future efforts when writing. Of particular interest is the response 'marks tend to make people worry too much', which indicates a distinct shift away from product, moving towards an increased sense of process orientation when writing. This comment also implies that receiving a mark can put the student off further engagement in the writing process, possibly influencing their confidence level.

Combined with selected qualitative data, the most significant results arose in the analysis of the marks attained by the two feedback groups in their final writing task. Out of a possible total score of 30 marks, the mean exam mark received by those who received 'praise and process' – based feedback was 3.5 marks higher than the 'product-rubric' group. This is a 10% differential between the respective feedback groups and aligns with the work of Bandura (1986) who identifies that feedback from others or from one's own activity can strengthen self-efficacy. It is also consistent with the work of Dweck (2006), who identified that praise and strategy had an increased impact upon the student achievement in her own research.

Although both of the feedback mechanisms identified in this action research are available and commonly used amongst teachers, this action research challenges all practitioners to consider how the nature of written feedback provided may be more important than the provision of feedback itself. This relates to the self-regulatory research of Zimmerman (2002), who suggests that previous feedback and the level of success attained in prior tasks will greatly influence the level of engagement and the level of volition in future efforts.

There are many connotations that one can surmise or ponder in light of the results collected. Did the 'product-rubric' feedback serve to provide a fixed mindset about their level of writing ability? And did the 'praise-strategy' feedback provide those students with additional confidence and self-belief, allowing them to take their writing to the next level? It would certainly appear that the boys in this group were more prolific and displayed an increased level of confidence about their writing,

which was demonstrated in their level of achievement and the quality of their work. Perhaps this was a direct result of the 'praise and strategy' rubric design, which provided the opportunity to organise comments in a more purposeful manner for the students, where as the 'product-rubric' feedback sheet only allowed for a limited amount of detail to be included by the teacher.

Despite the limitation of the study, whereby the design of this project only employed one class of boys over several terms in one academic year, these findings suggests that the nature of feedback may have quite a significant influence upon the level of engagement, complexity and confidence that Middle School boys display when completing written tasks. It certainly deserves further investigation across a range of different levels and subject areas.

THE TEACHER AND RESEARCHER

While the combined use of the qualitative and quantitative data serves to highlight the differences in employing the different approaches to using feedback, it is worth noting the professional learning gained by the teacher and the researcher as part of the 'action research' design and specifically having to 'self-reflect' and provide feedback about the nature of learning being developed.

Throughout the project, the level of engagement offered by the students provided an opportunity to think about the unit of work delivered and the success of the pedagogy. Combined with acknowledging how (as a teacher) the written feedback was being provided in class, the combination of research and teaching instigated a sense of inner review, which was a very powerful side product, and further evidence that the research was influencing the ongoing practice and professional learning.

A particularly pertinent point was made by Steve Allan, the class teacher, as he reflected upon the power that one has in providing feedback as students write:

"I realised that feedback is part of a bigger process; it is not the end point but has the potential to enhance or restrict student development. Feedback must be a contingent part of strategic planning, as it has a strong influence on shaping an academic culture and should be delivered in a variety of ways. Yet at the core of feedback, the rapport between student and teacher is essential – feedback is intentional dialogue, or rather feedback, at best, is active communication, not one dimensional, traditional dissemination."

Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, the action research was a valuable means of refining classroom practice, unpacking the process of delivering feedback to boys as they developed their writing through the study of Shakespeare in class. It was a highly valuable experience for the boys and for all involved, challenging the teacher to really reflect upon the ways that they foster boys to write in class. Although quite specific in design, this project highlighted the need to look at key factors that influence the motivation, confidence and ongoing success of students. This research confirmed that feedback is a powerful part of our daily teaching and learning.

Linking back to the research question, "How can the use of written feedback help boys to become more confident, powerful and prolific writers in the classroom?", several key findings are worthy of mention.

1. Boys continually indicated a strong desire to receive feedback from their teachers, so we need to ensure that we provide this for them on a regular basis, combined with the provision of strategy, which the data suggested, increased their level of confidence and engagement.
2. Boys were more motivated and wrote an increased sense of purpose and power when they received 'praise and process' feedback, which provided them with clear strategies and encouragement (growth mindset). In contrast, this approach appeared to be more successful than the boys who only received the 'rubric-product' feedback, who appeared to display less confidence and purpose when writing. These difference were also highlighted in the results attained in the final writing task and also identified in the various reflective comments of the boys during the project.
3. Boys who received the 'praise and strategy' feedback indicated a more personalised awareness of the processes associated with their own writing, such as the importance of writing with a high degree of detail and producing quality work, all of which aligns with the action of being a prolific writer. It is apparent that these students displayed an increased level of self-regulatory behaviour, focus and personal power in their writing.
4. In order to develop the confidence, power and prolific nature of boy's writing, we need to explore the underlying motivation and regulatory factors that are specifically related to this development, (i.e., self-efficacy, self-regulation, planning, establishing frameworks, etc). Teachers need to specifically address the mindset of learning they establish through the type of feedback they provide in their classrooms, investigating the influence of employing a *fixed* or *growth* mindset.
5. The use of teacher designed 'marking rubrics' have merit in the feedback process, but need to be carefully constructed so that they specifically relate to the nature of the task, purposefully linked to future writing attempts.
6. The conclusions from this action research project suggest that the confidence, power and prolific nature of writing may be attributed specifically to the type of feedback received, while being aligned with results from other subject areas (Dweck, 2008). As the education landscape continues to be re-shaped, these similarities require consideration as educators continue to develop writing as a core skill across all subjects and stages of school-based curriculum.
7. This action research further highlights the need to for teachers to develop an ongoing awareness of the effectiveness of their pedagogy, particularly the use of formative assessment when teaching students in class. This appears to be a key component in the development of powerful, prolific and confident writers. This was reinforced in the reflective comments of the classroom teacher throughout this research. It was also a common feature of the discussion that arose in the discussion between the researcher and the class teacher.
8. Action research projects provide the opportunity to focus upon a specific 'intervention' in class, and should be an ongoing part of our daily classroom teaching which continually informs our actions and ongoing practice.

In conclusion the data collected about 'praise and strategy' feedback appeared to foster an increased sense of confidence, power and prolificity amongst those boys when writing in class, and deserves more detailed consideration when providing written feedback to boys in class.

In light of the ever-changing world that exists around us, it is essential that teachers remember that at the core of successful writing, comes the key components of belief, confidence and skill, combined with knowledge (which needs to be ignited and fostered by the teacher), all of which need to be developed through the provision of meaningful and purposeful feedback. This provision must be timely and relate to the task at hand, rather than drawing upon a generic educational framework which only acknowledges levels of attainment, or fixed criteria. As educators we need to be aware that factors influencing students' level of achievement are often interrelated, and subsequently, may transfer into other aspects of their academic work and ongoing achievement.

Further research needs to investigate the reliability of these findings by developing more detailed 'action research', which can investigate the use of feedback with boys across a range of school settings and learning levels. A suggestion would be to implement a broader project that examines the confidence of boys as they write in tasks across a range of subject and year levels.

We need to be conscious of the ways in which we employ pedagogy every day, and continually look to interpret, trial and investigate new approaches to teaching writing so that we always have the students' interests and development at the core of our practice.

If we continue to shape students into accepting that they have a *fixed* mindset by only providing 'product-oriented' feedback, we are in the danger of diminishing the development of those creative and literary attributes of all of those students who deserved to have their *growth* mindset nurtured and challenged on a daily basis.

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Appendix 1

WRITING SURVEY

Name _____

Please answer the following questions by selecting the percentage that you agree with the statement. 100% would mean that you fully agree while 0% would mean that you don't agree with the statement at all.

Me as a writer

1. I can write well.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
2. I wish I could write better.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
3. I feel I am a good writer in relation to the other boys in my class.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
4. I feel that writing is an important skill.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
5. I enjoy writing in my free time.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
6. I enjoy writing for school.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
7. I would like help with strategies that improve my writing.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

My writing interests

8. I prefer writing about images that I see.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
9. I prefer writing about experiences that I have had myself.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
10. I prefer writing about things I have read about and am interested in.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
11. I prefer to choose my own topics when writing.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
12. I prefer to choose my own genre (poetry, narrative, factual) when writing.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
13. I prefer to write while listening to music.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

Different parts of my writing

14. When I write, I like to have feedback from my teacher.

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

15. When I write I find it difficult to edit and make changes /corrections.

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

16. I find it easier to write when I use the computer rather than writing by hand.

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

17. I like to share my work with an audience.

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

18. Which parts of writing, if any, do you find boring?

19. Which parts of writing, if any, do you enjoy?

20. Describe a memorable writing experience that you have had.

Reflection

Like all school-based research, there were elements of this process that had to be 'fine tuned' due to the nature of working in such a dynamic learning environment, but overall, this project was a highly value professional learning experience. The chance to work with others around the world through the IBSC research team was invaluable and further confirmed the importance of working together as educators, trying to continually reflect upon, and improve our practice. To meet, share and collaborate with others who have such a passion for education has been a great experience.

Changing the Balance: How Can Boys' Writing Confidence be Increased by Shifting Classroom Writing Frequency?

STEVEN J. MIDDLETON KNOX GRAMMAR SCHOOL, SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA, 2009
BRIGHTON GRAMMAR SCHOOL, MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA, 2010

Abstract

This Action Research project was completed to determine whether boys' writing confidence could be enhanced through shifts in classroom writing frequency. An intervention saw students complete daily targeted writing exercises designed to boost writing confidence over a three-week period. This project was initially designed for Year 12 boys approaching their final English examinations, before a change in employment led to further focus on the writing confidence of Year 8 boys. A range of qualitative data collection methods measured boys' writing confidence levels pre- and post-intervention. A "less is more" approach sought to increase the "writing metabolism" of students by adjusting the balance from longer complex pieces of writing on a weekly or twice weekly schedule, to a daily writing activity designed to mirror the briefer manner of social media with which boys write beyond the classroom. My own observations of boys' writing often revealed an innate lack of writing confidence expressed through frustrated statements such as *"I don't know how to start"* or *"How much do I have to write?"* Despite differences in age and geography, results obtained with both samples revealed confidence could be enhanced, as well as the joy boys can experience with writing when confidence is developed. Project outcomes challenged my thinking about boys' writing with implications for my own professional practice.

Introduction

A challenge for English teachers of boys is to equip students with the confidence to express themselves with authority in all forms of writing. The heavy emphasis placed on success in English, a compulsory final year subject in both NSW and Victoria, increases the pressure on students to succeed with writing. Today's boys write at unprecedented levels beyond class as social media develops and unique abbreviated communication forms evolve. Boys write frequently, but in small portions, characterized by status updates on *Facebook*, texts, blogging and emails. Yet writing for assessment purposes reveals that boys lack confidence and often freeze. Confidence is characterized here by the key terms, assurance and belief in one self.

The 2010 IBSC Action Research project started with the question: how can boys become powerful, prolific and confident writers? Within our research group the complexity of our task became apparent as we debated the contexts in which our students write. Our view was clear; writing will remain a vital skill in a 21st century economy, dependent on information dispersal and communication in rapidly evolving forms. We acknowledged recent literacy strategies, primarily focused on boys' reading and dominated by debate on literacy improvement as opposed to enhanced approaches to writing. A project to investigate whether boys' confidence in writing could be increased was developed. We identified various obstacles in the way of boys' interest in writing; notably observation of boys who found several writing forms irrelevant in a world of instant abbreviated communication. Their attitudes towards writing were a further barrier. In *Misreading Masculinity*, Newkirk (2002) argues that boys often feel that an open display of enthusiasm for schoolwork, particularly in the language arts, can undermine their identity as a "real boy." My investigation of writing confidence quickly overlapped with broader issues of self-esteem, identity and masculinity. Within this complex context were revealed boys who loved writing and craved opportunities for expression and who with confidence, could become powerful and prolific writers. My main focus was to be on confidence in the belief that this was the key term in our question.

Research Context

This project was conducted with samples of boys from two boys' schools in Sydney and Melbourne. The first sample was a Year 12 English Class of 22 boys at Knox Grammar completing their final Higher School Certificate (HSC) exams in Term 3, 2009. The second sample consisted of 21 Year 8 students at Brighton Grammar School in Term 1, 2010. The project explored boys' writing confidence, before and after an intervention increasing writing frequency from formalized expansive writing tasks to shorter, purpose-driven writing pieces of fifteen minutes duration. This intervention was initially designed to enhance writing confidence of a HSC Advanced English class before transforming to incorporate a group of eager writers at Brighton Grammar. This project initially developed out of a pragmatic quest to improve the marks of my Year 12 English class at Knox Grammar in their final examinations before leading the researcher in a range of directions in relation to boys, writing and boys' education.

Literature Review

The literature review for this project provided a wonderful opportunity to dive headlong into ongoing debates about boys' education, notably the development of literacy. The reading I pursued enhanced my awareness of contextual issues including policy, gender and notions of masculinity. Lingard *et al.* (2009) view education as central to national economic policies, with economic well-being of nations measured and assessed by comparative measures school systems. The Federal Government's "education revolution" and debate on the release of school achievement results in literacy and numeracy on the *MySchool* website reflect the significance of many of these debates.

Discussion on the educational achievements of boys and the gender gap in achievement tends to dominate discussion on the merits of single-gender education. In Lingard *et al.* (2008) Weaver-Hightower refers to today's focus on boys' education as the "boy turn" where the achievements of boys and boys' schools are heavily scrutinized in response to waves of debates over the past decade or more, resulting in structural and program reform within many boys' schools. Assessment and

research in areas of literacy reveals the English classroom of a boys' schools to be a complex environment, with educators often burdened by prevailing perceptions and generalizations that boys don't "read or write well."

The publication *'Yes he can – Schools where boys write well'* (Ofsted 2003) identified a range of factors likely to boost boys writing ability, with increased writing frequency as key to building stamina. Recently the *National Literacy Trust* (UK) 2009 study investigated student view of self as writer, acknowledging the large amount of writing completed by students due to technology, yet students did not view this experience as writing. Students linked the capacity to use the mechanics of writing as a key indicator of success, whilst those who saw themselves as weak writers did so due to their inability to write neatly. Writing success was deemed highly desirable and good writers are viewed as creative, intelligent and will do well in life. Boys expressed the attitude that writing was something that had to be done as opposed to enjoyed.

A negative attitude towards writing, impacting upon boys' enjoyment and confidence, was further evident. Hensen (2001) argued that negative attitudes to writing were due to lack of interest and perceived value in writing as opposed to self-confidence. Fletcher (2006) in *Writer Boys* was troubled by the attitude of boys in English classrooms, identifying boys as turned off, disengaged and disenfranchised. Writing was viewed as just another boring subject to be endured to get to the good stuff. Fletcher reported on boys as lacking confidence "*writing blind, uncertain of what to do and how to do it.*" This was linked to the writing boys completed in class. He observed boys who liked to write stories they enjoyed away from school, fitting Newkirk's (2002) description of school sanctioned narratives. Boys' enjoyment of certain narrow narrative forms and the use of violence were linked in the literature relating to their attitudes to writing and content. Influential commentators such as Pollack (2004) concluded that expression of emotion and affection is problematic for boys and isn't allowable in boys' writing because of the "boy code" which would make writers look weak and vulnerable. As Schilling (1986) argues, one response is to display and publish student writing prominently to make writing worthwhile, evidence of success helping to build confidence. Fletcher (2006) suggested negative attitudes emanate from a common response that boys experienced the act of writing as physically painful.

A range of cognitive studies focused on researching student writing confidence and how it affects performance. Kouliarianis (2005) found that low student confidence linked with underperformance and lower enthusiasm for writing. Studies in this area of writing research tended to address self-efficacy as distinct but related to confidence, with self-efficacy referring to the belief that one is capable of performing in a certain manner. Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory characterised *self-efficacy* beliefs as powerfully influencing student performance in academic endeavours. To Valiante (1997) student self-efficacy influenced choices, goals and effort when measuring whether graduate students' self-efficacy could be enhanced by strategic classroom practices. Valiante (1997) links student confidence to four main sources, informed by an individual's prior experiences in the form of interpreted success and failure: verbal and social persuasions in the form of praise, criticism, and attributional feedback. Issues of masculinity emerged in relation to writing attitude and a dominant view that boys need to be strong, and not show emotions; yet without a vehicle to express themselves confidence was lost. Clark & Dugdale (2007) suggest there is limited research examining how much young people write and how their confidence in writing forms.

Research Approach

The strategic importance of research in educational institutions is becoming more apparent. Bassey (1999) defines educational research as critical enquiry aimed at informing educational judgments and decisions in order to improve educational action. Schon's (1991) view was that educational research had particular relevance for educators, who should study their own practice to develop educational theories deriving from their practice. Action Research was chosen as the appropriate methodology for this project with an emphasis on utilizing qualitative data collection methods. Action Research is methodology with particular relevance to projects of this nature. This type of research is defined by Bassey (1999) as an enquiry carried out in order to understand, evaluate, change and improve educational practice. The nature of Action Research as interpretivist inquiry makes it highly relevant to research within schools. Significantly, Descombe (1998) argues that the most crucial and essential aspect of Action Research is the practitioner, due to an active rather than passive or observational participation.

Research Samples

This project was initially undertaken at Knox Grammar School in Sydney. Knox is a large independent boys' school located on the Upper North shore of Sydney. The K-12 School has an enrolment of approximately 1300 in the senior School, with a cohort of 218 in Year 12. Knox is a non-selective school with a strong academic culture. There has been significant focus in the past few years on improving boys' literacy and raising academic standards. A change in employment status at the end of 2009, presented the opportunity to conduct Action Research at Brighton Grammar School located in the bayside area of Melbourne. Due to my new role at Brighton Grammar my focus would shift to the development of writing confidence amongst Year 8 boys. Despite the geographical distance separating them, Knox and Brighton share many similarities; both can be regarded as "community schools" educating students mainly from the local area. Both schools have very strong reputations in the Australian educational context and achieve fine results at the end of each senior year. Both schools promote literacy amongst boys with a variety of specialized programs and academic achievement is highly valued and celebrated within each school. Both Knox and Brighton offer education programs for boys of all abilities with an emphasis on a broad liberal education coupled with strong co-curricular engagement for each boy.

Knox Grammar Year 12: HSC Advanced English students study a common content "Area of Study" focusing on notions of *Belonging* before completing three Module studies on various aspects of Text. This demanding course introduces sophisticated concepts to students and requires extensive and sophisticated writing skill for success. My initial research sample was a class of 21 boys, known to me for six years as their Head of Year. I had taught the Advanced course to them for two years and so was in a good position to utilize this class for research purposes as I was well aware of their strengths and limitations. The sample class could be characterized as highly able and enjoyable to work with. A range of writing abilities existed within the class, from the very high end to those who found writing difficult due to either handwriting or learning issues.

The compulsory completion of two Units of English at HSC level requires the completion of two two-hour examinations at Advanced level, with students completing five extended writing responses and one shorter response in four hours. When the research was conducted at Knox Grammar, the class was in the preparation phase for examinations, immediately after a Trial examination period.

Brighton Grammar Year 8: In contrast, at Brighton Grammar I had taken a role as Deputy Head of the Middle School so my focus with students was very different. The opportunity to work with a group of Year 8 students, very much at the opposite end of the writing experience, provided a great opportunity in my Action Research project to refine and adapt the intervention to suit students in a Middle Years context. The students in my Year 8 English class were of mixed ability and the full range of attitude to writing experiences was evident from the outset. The Term 1 English course was primarily focused on introducing the boys to a range of new concepts relating to text and language usage, whilst also reinforcing the mechanics of grammar and punctuation to ensure the boys were equipped with the tools to communicate effectively. Term 1 proved an interesting time to conduct research as I was still getting to know the students whilst gaining some insight and assessment of their ability.

Data Collection

Several data collection methods were used in this project including surveys, observations, a questionnaire and small group discussion. Data were collected by an initial quantitative survey and then followed by qualitative methods such as interviewing and discussion in small groups. Small focus group discussions allowed for the collection of data through some scribing and also via recording of the conversations. The pre-survey administered was one designed in the IBSC Action Research meetings at Lindisfarne College in New Zealand.

The research process was outlined to both sample groups very clearly and questions were answered. All boys participated in the writing exercises, although they were given an opportunity to refrain from participation. Both research samples completed a pre-intervention survey designed to assess their attitudes to writing and their writing experience. During the intervention which introduced various writing activities, I collected a range of writing samples from students which allowed me to also observe any noticeable changes in writing expertise. At the completion of the intervention boys completed a further survey and were then involved in both informal and formal discussions, as individuals and in small groups, to identify issues and make conclusions. The data collected in the process were tabulated, analyzed and compared to illustrate findings and draw conclusions.

Data Analysis and Findings

KNOX GRAMMAR SCHOOL, 2009

The response to the initial survey revealed the very mixed attitudes students in this sample had to their own writing. This was apparent in terms of their own critical evaluation of their writing ability and their responses to questions relating to enjoyment and writing experiences. All students reported that they were writing frequently beyond the English classroom, predominantly via social media, and that they felt most comfortable when writing through typing. Handwriting was also reported as a barrier to some students' enjoyment of writing, due to hand pain and an inability to match handwriting quantity with typing quantity.

It was clear from the initial research data that some boys in the sample enjoyed written expression for a range of purposes, as diverse as writing poetry or articles on sporting fixtures for school publications. These students were often boys who had chosen to complete Extension English studies as part of their HSC course. However, there was an overall expression of limited enjoyment and engagement with writing as a precursor to HSC examinations. A possible factor in this finding may well be related to issues of stress and the burden of examination pressure, yet this result revealed a dominant view amongst students that the writing process was “tedious” and “a means to an end.”

After the completion of the pre-intervention survey the action was outlined to students and was introduced in the next ten writing periods. Over a three week period in the classroom, the writing dynamics were shifted to incorporate a daily fifteen-minute writing exercise either analytical or creative in content and style, often designed to mirror previous HSC Advanced English examinations questions. At times writing sessions would target specific areas of student deficiency, such as essay introductions or detailed analytical content related to specific textual sequences. As a whole students embraced the opportunity to be involved in the project. This was gratifying as the potential for students to want familiarity as they approached examinations was a potential challenge. Following the completion of the intervention data were gathered via qualitative survey and small focus group discussion.

The shift in student response to writing and reported confidence with writing was revealing, providing an overwhelming endorsement from boys that the writing intervention had enhanced confidence. Twenty-one of the twenty-two students expressed a view that their confidence as a writer increased significantly and that they now classified themselves as powerful writers. Powerful was defined as the ability to represent a strong/forceful argument and opinion supported by detailed content and the capacity to represent a sophisticated concept about belonging in creative form.

The most revealing data came from the final discussions in the form of short interviews where boys were provided with the opportunity to speak with me and amongst themselves about their writing experience. In contrast to the initial survey, the overwhelming response from students was one of greater enjoyment and shifting attitudes to writing, characterized by reported increases in writing confidence. The key question, *has the increased frequency of writing helped you become a more confident writer?*, revealed a range of consistent responses. These responses included reflections on changed experiences of writing:

“It has helped me think better on my feet when under pressure.”

“I felt I could present my own ideas and argue my position with greater confidence.”

“The writing approach helped me prepare for exams by developing my memory.”

“I was able to absorb and represent more information.”

“My writing quantity improved as I was able to write more in shorter time frames.”

“The speed with which I can write improved.”

“Increases in my vocabulary allowed me to write with greater confidence.”

Beyond these statements it was significant that a class which had earlier characterized writing experience as “tedious” reported a significant shift in enjoyment of writing with several boys expressing new found pride in their writing.

In summary, the analysis of the findings of the data from my Year 12 class revealed improved writing confidence levels amongst the majority of students within the sample. Students embraced the use of shorter and more frequent writing exercises devised to target specific revision aims and writing forms. In particular, the introduction of exercises based on the creative writing component of the final examination was well received. This was an area where students expressed least confidence in the initial survey, largely due to some poor results in the Time trial examination. Attitudes of students towards their writing experience revealed improved writing confidence through statements such as:

"Writing with greater frequency helped me to develop stamina."

"I was able to increase the sophistication levels of my writing."

"I felt more confident as I could write more and the best outcome, my marks improved as a result."

BRIGHTON GRAMMAR YEAR 8

I was particularly interested to analyze the data obtained from my Year 8 class at Brighton Grammar School. Whilst the intervention was adapted to focus purely on creative writing forms to fit with the Year 8 curriculum, the unique development needs of early adolescent boys appeared to establish a good contextual background with which to test writing confidence. The Year 8 students completed the same pre-intervention survey, designed to reveal attitudes towards writing experiences and current levels of writing confidence. It was clear from these results that many of these students really enjoyed their writing, reporting successful writing experiences relating to a specific narrative they had written or praise they had received from a teacher. Interestingly these experiences consistently referred to writing experiences in primary school. Boys who identified themselves as having negative attitudes towards writing often identified writing as "*boring*" "*confusing*" and limited ability in spelling and punctuation as the key indicators of their attitude. One student offered the revealing perspective that "*writing well is a gift and cannot be taught.*"

Over a course of three weeks at the end of Term 1 students completed a daily writing exercise, specifically focused on a particular aspect of narrative development or the specific use of a language device such as simile or metaphor. A very interesting result emanated from the completion of each writing task with many boys asking if they could read their work out to the class and gain further feedback on their pieces. The confidence expressed by students in this initiative was profound. Following the intervention students completed another survey before participating in informal discussions and small group talks. Again the varied responses from students indicated more positive attitudes towards writing and enhanced confidence from the participants. Examples of statements recorded from students included:

"I really never liked writing before but now enjoy it."

"I can write more quantity now."

"Knowing I can write better improves my attitude towards writing."

"I am not afraid of what people say about my writing due to increased confidence."

"I can write half a page in 10 minutes now, before I could only write 5 lines."

"Writing used to be a chore, now it is fun."

"The pressure for me in writing lots was too much, that was removed."

In summary, the Year 8 students at Brighton Grammar revealed a greater initial enjoyment of writing. My observation was that this was related to their age and previous positive writing experiences. It would be interesting to explore this further and explore how attitudes towards writing shift across secondary school experience as boys are exposed to different representations of masculinity. Despite student enjoyment of writing it was just as clear that the majority still lacked confidence in their writing, particularly with a range of forms only recently introduced to them. Common expressions of this were found in student responses:

"How much do I have to write?"

"Will I lose marks for this mistake?"

"How do I start?"

"Can you read my handwriting; will I be marked down for this?"

In contrast to the experience of a Year 12 class, the notion of writing for examinations and assessment tasks was not the same, yet some of the anxieties expressed by students about writing were similar. The curriculum and design of Middle Years programs seeking to engage boys with a range of active learning activities is an ideal place to develop student confidence, especially as limited external assessment demands at this time obviously allow a wider range of writing experiences to be undertaken. This includes making time for writing for a range of purposes, and importantly including enjoyment as a factor designed to increase boys engagement with writing. Despite many students reporting more positive attitudes from the outset there was still significant increase in writing confidence reported at the completion of the intervention.

Discussion and Implications

The research data collected in both samples tended to reinforce the main themes evident in my literature review. Within our boys' classrooms there was a range of attitudes expressed toward writing; however, a dominant perspective emerged that boys found writing problematic. A consistent element was the frustration and lack of confidence experienced by boys in relation to writing – notably in the areas of appropriate structures and conventions, content and length of response.

A main conclusion to be drawn from this Action Research project and possibly explored through broader more detailed quantitative research is the manner in which boys' confidence with writing was enhanced by a shift in classroom writing frequency. The results of this project revealed that it was possible in this instance to enhance boys' writing confidence through a range of simple activities designed to shift the writing balance, notably writing less but more often.

The English classroom within a boys' school appears to be the most appropriate place to develop student confidence with writing. This is due to the emphasis on writing that exists in the subject and also to the time spent in this class as opposed to non-core subjects. However, as writing is so central to what boys do in every subject it is clear that schools and educators could develop whole school approaches to enriching student writing experience to create powerful adolescent writers. One manner in which this experience can be enhanced is through having consistency across subject areas in terms of writing duration and expectations. Boys often complain of the different expectations of writing essays in History as opposed to English, for example.

By coincidence the different samples utilized in this project tended to reinforce and confirm the results of each other. In my opinion, having access to two samples at various stages but within like schools became of strategic importance when considering current practice. A clear implication from the results of the project is that it is important to enhance writing confidence amongst boys as early as possible. The Middle Years would appear to be an ideal location to establish a strong writing culture within a boys' school with curriculum designed to build on the enthusiasm many boys show for writing at this age. Writing for final examinations is another matter altogether and whilst the focus is on revealing understanding of concepts through the use of detailed textual knowledge and representation of concepts, the impact confidence in writing can have on student success is clear. Further research appears warranted in this area within boys' school to investigate other strategic teaching classroom techniques relevant to boys and designed to enhance writing confidence. From the data collected in this study it is clear that changes in writing frequency may be valid in turning boys into more confident writers, which in turn creates powerful and prolific writers amongst our students. As a result of the outcome of my Action Research project I will adjust and refine the writing rhythms and structures that occur within my classroom in the knowledge that confidence can be seen as a key to revealing student writing skills.

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Reflection

On reflection, many challenges were encountered in the completion of this project, notably a shift in employment from Knox to Brighton and a move from Sydney to Melbourne, but the most enjoyable incursion upon my research was the birth of my second daughter Indiana in Nov 2009. I was fortunate enough to take long service leave during this period of time, enabling me to read widely and diversely for both the IBSC Action Research project but also for my post graduate Doctoral study on Boys and Leadership. The reading I completed for each project tended to inform the other and allowed me to place this small scale project within a major larger context focused on issues in boys' education. It was apparent that notions of masculinity were highly relevant in relation to boys' attitude towards writing. A great deal of research and discussion has focused on this aspect of boys' education in recent years and further professional development appears warranted to help teachers understand the link between models of masculinity and student performance.

I commend the Trustees of the IBSC for the leadership they have taken in expanding the Action Research programme. The process of Action research allows professionals to pause and take a deep breath and reflect on the teaching and learning process occurring daily in our classrooms in a bid to improve the education of boys. I highly recommend the experience to colleagues looking to enhance their professional experience.

This project has provided a unique opportunity to reflect on my classroom practice as an English teacher and the manner in which I teach communication skills to boys in a changing world. On the completion of this project I would like to thank Di Laycock and Margot Long for the countless amounts of hours they have spent guiding and mentoring researchers from all over the world. I would also like to thank my fellow researchers for their insightful, humorous and supportive approaches to this project and their own research across the globe. I would especially like to thank the Headmaster of Brighton Grammar School, Mr. Michael Urwin, for his support and encouragement in completing this project at his school when it was apparent I would be relocating from Sydney to Melbourne. I would also like to thank the Head of English at Knox Grammar, Ms. Kath Lathouras, for her active encouragement of my involvement in this project. Importantly I would like to thank the many boys who participated so eagerly and enthusiastically in the activities designed to build their confidence.

I would encourage all staff at IBSC Member schools to consider the Action Research Project as a unique opportunity for professional development with the capacity to enrich both colleague and student classroom experience. Finally, I was struck by the enthusiastic, insightful and co-operative approach of the students involved in the Research process and I thank the students at Knox Grammar and Brighton Grammar for their support. The real challenge for me was working with two groups of boys at different ages and places with their writing. Whilst this was necessitated by the change of employment it actually broadened my thinking and project immensely, allowing me to refine teaching practice at both ends of the spectrum.

The Power of Blogs

MARGO PICKWORTH SHORE SCHOOL, NORTH SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

Abstract

For six consecutive weeks in 2009, Year Six students from Shore Preparatory School in North Sydney, Australia and Year 7 students at St Christopher's School in Virginia, USA contributed to a collaborative writing blog, based on the novel *Downriver* by Will Hobbs. Both groups of students shared the same text with their class teachers, while using the medium of blogging as a collaborative writing tool to share ideas about the novel.

Data were gathered using both qualitative and quantitative methods to determine whether this collaborative writing project assisted boys to become powerful, prolific and confident writers. Results indicated that the blogging process in this project failed to provide any increase in the volume of writing; however the opportunity to share opinions and ideas globally provided motivation to write more powerfully and with increased confidence in this context.

Introduction

This action research project, carried out under the umbrella of the International Boys' Schools Coalition, sought to answer the following question: *How does a collaborative writing project using blogs, help boys to become powerful, prolific and confident writers?*

Many factors influence boys' writing. One of the least researched factors appears to be the notion of "having an audience" – that is, the idea that the task of writing is completed with the expectation that it will be read by someone else. The purpose of the writing in this project was that someone other than the teacher will read it.

With the advent of Web 2.0 technology, new opportunities have emerged to provide audiences for writing. The blog or weblog is one such tool. Richardson (2009) defines the blog as an "easily created, easily updateable website that allows an author to publish instantly to the internet from any internet connection" (Richardson, 2009 p. 17). Blogs are not static, but a collection of reflections and conversations that are regularly updated. They engage readers with ideas, questions and links, asking readers to think, respond and interact. My question therefore, was: Could blogging provide an avenue for developing powerful, confident and prolific writers?

Davis (2009) incorporated blogs into a writing program and found that students communicated more powerfully when they began to “realise they had an audience who cared about what they had to say”. Further, Ellison and Yu (2008) found that collaborative blogs assisted class members to help each other understand class concepts. As reported by Ramaswami (2008), incorporating blogging in a writing program had noticeable benefits, including making writing more precise, exact and focused. Because of the wider audience it afforded, blogging provided “a more instructive format – for others to read, not just for the teachers eyes”(Ramaswami, 2008).

This action research project hoped to build on these findings by providing opportunities for writing to a global audience, through a collaborative blog. More precisely, it was hoped to examine whether the introduction of the collaborative blog would assist boys to become powerful, prolific and confident writers. In this context, powerful writing is characterized by relevance, meaning and logic. Prolific writing refers to the amount of text that a writer produces, notably that the writing is substantial and lengthy. Thirdly, confident writing refers to writing in which students feel they can express their personal responses to key ideas.

Research Context

The research took place at Shore Preparatory School, situated in a central city location in North Sydney. The Shore School has been established for over one hundred and twenty years and consists of three campuses – Early Learning Centre, Preparatory School Years 3–6 and Senior School Years 7–12.

Shore School follows the New South Wales Board of Studies curriculum, which places a strong emphasis on the Key Learning Areas of English and Mathematics. The research was led by me, the teacher librarian, with the co-operation and assistance of Year 6 classroom teacher, Mr. Paul Harrington.

The sample group selected consisted of twenty-five boys in Year 6, ages eleven and twelve from Shore Preparatory School, North Sydney. Twenty-six students from St. Christopher’s School, Richmond, Virginia also participated in the blogging process.

Action Research

An action research framework was selected. According to Stringer (2008):

Action research is a process of systematic inquiry. Its purpose is to provide educational practitioners with new knowledge and understanding, enabling them to improve educational practice or resolve significant problems in the classrooms and schools. (p.13)

Although many teachers already undertake informal and intuitive reflection on their practice, the action research process provides a meaningful framework for authentic and meaningful reflection. Action research was a most suitable methodology choice as this study was undertaken in the work context by professional classroom teachers who are active learners themselves and interested in implementing best practice pedagogy with their students. The results of the study will have direct relevance back to their own classroom teaching environments.

Research Methods

Stringer's (2008) Action Research Cycle has been used as a basis for the research method. This involves five broad recurring stages – (1) Designing the Study by carefully refining the issue to be investigated, (2) Gathering Data from a variety of sources, (3) Analyzing Data to identify key features of the issue investigated, (4) Communicating Outcomes to the relevant audience and (5) Taking Action by using the outcomes of the study to work towards a resolution of the issue investigated. As action research is cyclical in nature, a return to the Design Phase, using the new findings, would then follow.

In practical terms, the action research process meant selecting an aspect of the writing process that could lead to powerful, prolific and confident writers and completing my literature review to refine the issue to be investigated. In my case blogging was selected. Permission was sought from the Headmaster, staff, students and parents before the Gathering Data stage was begun.

The Intervention

After a great deal of ongoing communication with St. Christopher's, three blogs were set up to facilitate and maximise the opportunities for writing. For convenience they were identified as Downriver, Downriver A and Downriver B. The blogs integrated the mutual sharing between schools of the text *Downriver* by Will Hobbs. Several lessons were also implemented to discuss ideas such as themes, setting, plot and characters in the novel. Guidance was also provided on the etiquette and expectations of blogging.

Data Collection

Pre-intervention data were collected through face-to-face interviews with participating students and staff. This was complemented by on-line surveys, requesting data on attitudes to writing, the amount and type of preferred writing and the perceived ideal conditions for writing. Data were collected to provide some comparison information both before and after the intervention as well as assisting to shape the intervention process itself. I also kept a diary throughout the process to record relevant observations and note-worthy information from a teacher's viewpoint.

Blog posts were regularly submitted by the teacher librarian and were based on aspects of the novel including characterization, plot, points of interest in the setting of the novel and relevance to local and personal circumstances. Boys were then encouraged to respond voluntarily to each blog post by adding their own blog comments. They were also encouraged to add blog comments on other students' blog comments. This process continued regularly for six weeks, after which the blogging was reluctantly drawn to a close and the data interpretation process begun.

Data during and after the intervention were collected through:

Face-to-Face Interviews: Pre- and post-interviews were held with all participants and staff. Students were interviewed in groups of four and staff interviewed individually. A Zoom Recorder tool which collects data in mp3 format was used to record responses to three interview questions. This enabled me to listen, transcribe into written format and then codify the responses. The interviews used open-ended questions to allow the participants to share attitudes towards writing both before and after the blogging. In particular, the post-interview allowed an opportunity for

participants to reflect on their writing process – the best part of the blogging, the effect that the technology had on their writing and the opportunity to collaborate.

Online Surveys: Pre- and post-surveys were undertaken by both participants and staff. The online tool Survey Monkey was used to construct the surveys which consisted of six multiple choice items. Participants were given an opportunity to contribute additional comments to any of the survey items. Students were allowed class time to complete the online surveys both before and after the blogging process.

The pre-survey gathered baseline data from students on their preferred types of writing, the amount of writing they usually produced and their feelings towards writing. It also asked for which factors could assist their writing and a preference for possible writing audiences.

The aim of the post-survey was to examine the effects of blogging on boys' writing confidence, the amount of writing produced, and the opportunity for meaningful writing by providing a real audience with which to share ideas (powerful writing). The Survey Monkey Tool provided both a numeric and percentage score for each item on the questionnaire which provided data for analysis.

Rubric Analysis of Blog Comments: Quantitative analysis of the students' written contribution to the blogs themselves (Blog Comments) was analysed using a self-devised Rubric tool. The rubric was based on Arnold's assessment tools used in a longitudinal study of writing abilities (Arnold, 1987). All Blog Comments were Rated 1 to 4 according to the following six criteria:

- Prolific writers – How often did they contribute to the blog? How long were their replies?
- Powerful Writers – Did students provide meaningful, logical and relevant writing in blog entries?
- Confident writers – Did students express personal responses to the key ideas in the blog?
- Engaged Writers – Were students able to produce an adequate standard of writing?
- Audience Aware Writers – Were students aware of the audience with whom they were blogging?
- Collaborative writers – Were students able to link with the ideas of others?

Data Analysis

A combination of qualitative and quantitative data analysis techniques were used in this action research project. Mertler (2009) indicates that the primary goal of data analysis is "to reduce vast amounts of data into smaller, more manageable sets of information" (p. 139). In order to manage my collected data, three broad steps have been followed – organization of the data, description of the data and interpretation of the data. To protect anonymity during the analysis procedure, all participants were referred to using only their first name. Writing samples from both Shore and St Christopher's were combined for rubric analysis.

Initially, all interview responses were transcribed into Word documents, examined closely and then codified using broad similarities noted in responses. This was a manual process using highlighter pens. Similar responses were noted and interpreted, with particular focus on those aspects of the data that would answer my research question.

For pre- and post-questionnaires, responses were also closely examined. The Online Survey tool provided percentages and numeric analysis of each response, allowing for detailed scrutiny of results. Other comments provided by both staff and students were also considered closely and codified if necessary.

For each of the six writing dimensions (Prolific, Powerful, Confident, Engaged, Audience Aware and Collaborative writing), each piece of student writing was assigned a rating. Following this, the frequency was calculated numerically into tables. Excel charts were constructed for the specific measures of Prolific, Powerful and Confident writing. From the tables and charts, trends could be clearly visible for analysis and interpretation.

Reliability in this research was sought by employing a range of data collection techniques e.g., surveys, interviews, direct observation and writing through Blog comments. The data collected were organised using a variety of methods such as listening to sound files, transcribing files to text and reading online survey results as well as writing in Blog Comments.

Validity and authenticity was sought through the honest and accurate reporting of findings. Collaboration between the classroom teacher and researcher in the Australian setting ensured legitimacy throughout the research process. All data collected were kept systematically in digital and paper format, clearly labeled in folders and directly matched with the original questions. All attempts were made to ensure that the research process was transparent both to its participants and the IBSC team.

Results

During the pre-blog interview students were asked to indicate their attitude towards writing. The majority presented a positive attitude, stressing a particular preference for imaginative writing rather than information reports. When asked what could assist them to become more powerful and confident writers, most replied that feedback from others would be preferable as well as the need to read more widely. When asked to report on their best piece of writing most students indicated a recent imaginative story they had written for a school-wide story-writing competition.

Post-blog interviews indicated that the best (most enjoyable) part of the blog was the collaborative aspect. Most students included responses such as *"I enjoyed just writing to see each other's opinions"* (Michael) and *"I enjoyed communicating with the boys in the US"* (Jack). Other enjoyable aspects were the content of the blog such as the discussion on dangerous animals and football, and the mechanical aspects of blogging such as its ease of use.

When asked about the influence of technology on writing, most students agreed that the blog had influenced the mechanics of their writing. Sample responses included: *"I wanted the boys in the US to see that I am well organised with my punctuation"* (Andrew) and the technology *"made me check that my writing was good before I sent it off"* (Sam) or *"because there was no spell-check on it so you had to learn it by yourself"* (Ed). Most responses displayed an awareness of the need to write well for their audience by using the appropriate mechanics of writing.

A third post-blog interview question asked students to consider the influence of sharing on their writing. Some responses indicated writing improved because they enjoyed the content of the blog

such as the opportunity to discuss dangerous animals. Most responses however indicated that their writing improved because *“we got to see the opinions of other people”* (Hugh), *“I had to make sure that it was making sense because I didn’t know who I was blogging with and what they thought”* (Lachlan). Only a small number of responses indicated that the sharing had no effect.

Surveys also provided a range of results. In the pre-blog survey, most students indicated they were infrequent and meager writers. However most indicated that they felt confident about their writing skills – they were “good at writing”. Twenty-one of twenty-five responses indicated that writing with a computer would help them with writing. Finally, parents and teachers were reported as the most favorable audience for their writing with a small number indicating they would like only their classmates to read their writing.

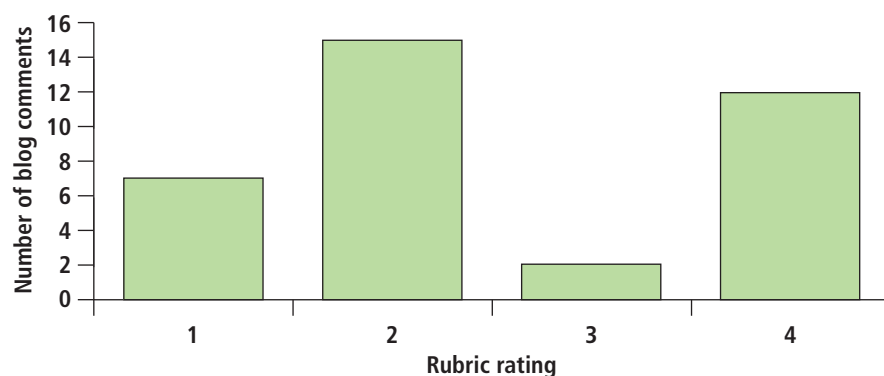
In the post-blog student survey questions were designed to investigate whether students had noted any changes in their attitudes to writing and in the amount of writing produced as well as any changes in writing confidence during the blogging process.

The most enjoyable aspect of the collaborative blog appeared to be the reading of others’ comments and the least favourable was the writing of their own blog comments. Another significant finding was that most students reported feeling confident about their writing during the blogging process. Twenty-one of twenty-five participants indicated that they felt ‘Confident – I felt I had something important to say’.

The majority of students failed to report any difference in the amount of writing they did as a result of the blog. It appears that their attitude to writing had also remained the same, with half reporting they would like to do it again and half not interested. When asked for future blogging suggestions, the opportunity to ‘chat’ on free choices of topic was suggested, as well as the opportunity to share an Australian novel, allowing more time and the addition of ‘games’ to the blog.

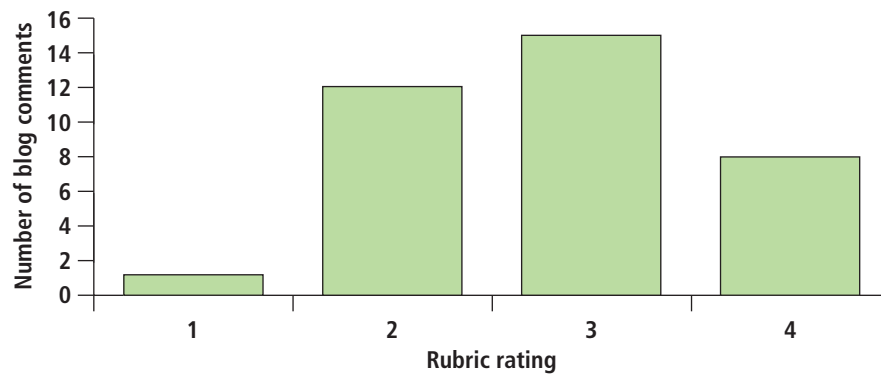
Analysis of blog comments revealed a variety of trends. For Prolific Writing, twelve students contributed regularly with blog comments of at least four sentences (Rating of 4). However, fifteen students contributed some blog comments of less than three sentences (Rating of 2). This provides a mixed and inconclusive result for this dimension.

Prolific Writing



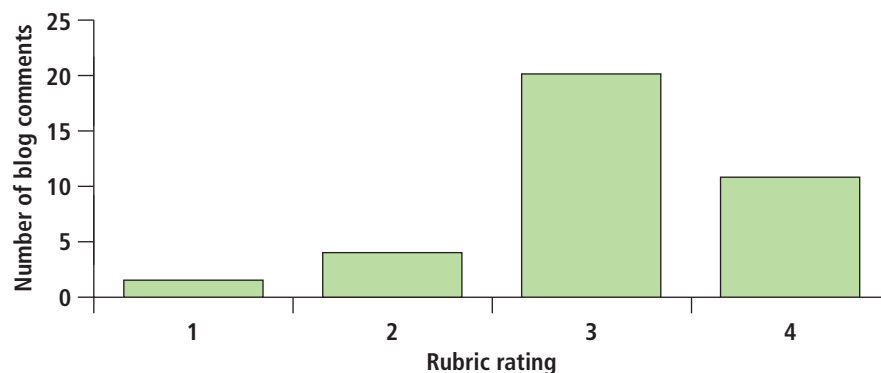
For Powerful Writing, defined as providing ‘meaningful, logical and relevant writing in blog entries’, twenty-three responses rated 3 or above – that is, their blog comments included many references to issues raised through blog posts, reading and class discussions. Only a very small number of responses failed to demonstrate any evidence of powerful writing.

Powerful Writing



One of the most significant results was that over half of the blog comments displayed confidence by showing ‘Some evidence of personal response to issues raised through blog posts, reading and class discussions’ (blog comment rubric 3). Only a very small number of blog comments failed to demonstrate any evidence of confident writing.

Confident Writing



The two dimensions of Engaged Writing and Audience Aware Writing displayed similar trends. The majority of responses rated 3 – that is, ‘Good standard of spelling, grammar and syntax and making sense with ideas’ for Engaged Writing and ‘Sound understanding of setting of context and explicit references to audience’ for Audience Aware writing.

Evidence of Collaborative writing, measured by linkages with others ideas, appeared to be limited. Max (St. Christopher’s) provided an example of collaborative writing by addressing Duncan (Shore): *“I truly appreciate your recommendations and will read the latter of the books you have chosen”* (Max 12/2/09 11.39 Downriver B).

In summary, rubric results indicated inconclusive evidence that the collaborative blog contributed to Prolific writing. On the other hand, there was evidence of both Powerful and Confident writing, within the definitions used for this action research project. It also appears that the blog allowed opportunities for Engaged and Audience Aware writing, but there was little evidence of Collaborative writing.

Teacher observations and surveys indicated a positive response to the collaborative blog and its role in developing confident, powerful and prolific writers. Initial comments indicated that this group of boys were reluctant writers and often “*require substantial scaffolding to achieve success – especially with more advanced text types*” (pre-blog teacher online survey). At the conclusion of the blog, the classroom teacher expressed disappointment at the quantity of writing but the quality was “*generally pleasing*” and “*improved throughout the process*” (post-blog teacher online survey). A final positive comment from the classroom teacher revealed that having an “*authentic audience had a tremendous influence to the boys’ approach to their writing*” (post-blog teacher online survey).

Conclusion

It is difficult to provide a simplistic answer to my original research question – How does the introduction of a collaborative writing project using blogs, help boys to become powerful, prolific and confident writers? However it was clear that participating in a collaborative blog provided boys with an opportunity to experience a genuine audience for their writing. This is clear from both post-survey and post-interview student responses as well as teacher response.

Over fifty boys contributed regular pieces of writing to the collaborative blogs based on the *Downriver* novel over a period of six weeks. That is, they continually made thoughtful, meaningful comments to a global ‘cyber’ audience across the other side of the world. Despite the fact that most students reported that the blog did not make a difference to the amount of their writing, a finding supported also by the analysis of their blog comments, it is concluded that the blogging experience provided opportunities for some powerful, and confident writing to a ‘real’ audience.

Further extensions of the study in the future could include examining the supporting pedagogy for the implementation of the blog. In this study, the blog writing was supported and guided with other relevant teaching activities based on the novel *Downriver*. Thus, a further direction for the research could be to examine the teaching framework needed to support effective blog writing.

While most of the blogging revolved around the content of the novel, several students requested a place for social interactions. A further consideration could then be the role of shared social communication in an online environment as well as contribution to boys’ writing.

A further issue to be researched could be the ‘ownership’ of the blog. I led the discussions throughout the research. However by allowing students more direct contributions, their own blogs could possibly lead to more powerful, prolific and confident writing.

Allowing students to lead the discussion or even encouraging ownership of writing their own blogs may be more effective than my teacher-controlled model.

If undertaking such a project again, several features could be improved. There were some initial technology issues and the blog software would be closely considered next time. Also, using the same pre-interview and post-interview survey questions would have allowed for a more direct comparison of changes in confidence and power in writing. Collecting pre- and post-writing samples from participants could also have been included. A further direction for the study could be the most suitable teacher scaffolding of the blogging process as well as the enriched understanding of the text that blogging could provide.

The simplicity and ease of writing and publishing to a world-wide audience is rapidly expanding with extensive Web 2.0 technology. One of the values of this action research project is that now my findings can be used to begin confidently using such tools effectively in our teaching environments. As expressed by the classroom teacher involved in the project – “*a very worthwhile activity which gave me good guidance as to how I could utilize this technology to improve student writing*”. I believe that one of the values of my action research project lies right there!

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Reflection

My initial application to be part of the IBSC team came from a strong desire to be involved in international educational research. I had reached a stage in my teaching career where I wanted to be able to contribute meaningful research findings that would make a practical difference in the classroom. I have always found teaching to be both a challenging and rewarding career and the IBSC action research project appeared to be a perfect opportunity to extend my professional experience and contribute to the existing professional body of knowledge.

The close examination of boys' writing using the action research process has been invaluable. Reflecting closely on our day to day practices is rare in the 'busy-ness' of teaching. Using blogging provided an opportunity for both students and teacher to learn together – an authentic learning experience. While my results did not provide conclusive evidence that blogs contributed to confident, powerful and prolific writing, I will be able to use my results as basis for further investigation of this topic.

One of the highlights of the experience has been the team approach to the research process. The shared Google site has been a constant source of information as well as support of the team leaders and fellow researchers in sharing the finer details of our research.

Overall, the experience has overwhelmingly met my expectations. I have become familiar with the process of action research and feel that it is a valuable framework to use in continually evaluating teaching practice. A deeper understanding of the impact of my teaching practice on boys' writing has developed. I am very grateful for support of the IBSC, Shore School and fellow researchers.

Using an Online Discussion Board with Upper School Boys

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Abstract

This report summarizes an action research project that was undertaken at Crescent School, an independent boys' school, in Toronto, Canada. The purpose of the research was to determine how the use of an online discussion board could improve the writing of Upper School boys. It outlines the various stages that the writer went through in order to find a method of using the board that was appropriate. It also includes the comments from the adolescent participants. The results show that the use of the discussion board was successful with respect to the research question: How can the use of an online discussion board help senior Upper School boys become more prolific, confident, and powerful writers?

Introduction

We live in a fast-paced world where information is at boys' fingertips and accessible information is updated by the second. Similarly, much of the written information that boys receive, especially electronically, is fact-efficient and language-truncated. Despite this, it is still necessary for boys to understand that effective writing is not instant; it takes time and it is hard work. It is important for boys to see the value of their own written words and to honour their thoughts by choosing the best words with which to express them.

The English classroom is rich in the exploration of ideas, as well as abundant in its oral discourse. However, as Elliot Eisner states in his work, *The Kinds of Schools We Need* (1998), "There is nothing so slippery as a thought" (p. 27). Perhaps some of those rich ideas and thoughts are not fully developed in oral discourse. It is also conceivable that not all boys' ideas are heard, as the discussion changes course and discussion threads left loose. Certainly, writing ideas down can help to give those "slippery thoughts" a more sure footing in the boys' minds. It is our task as teachers "to prepare the students to think critically and creatively and to express themselves clearly and thoughtfully..." (McCarthy, 2008, p. 72). Following this line of thinking, it is also necessary to acknowledge that the ability to write powerfully and meaningfully is integral to solid learning and significant communication.

Thus, one may see the significance of the research question: *How can we help boys become prolific, powerful and confident writers?* And my own sub-question: *How can the use of an online discussion board help senior Upper School boys become more prolific, confident, and powerful writers?*

The rationale behind using a discussion board as an intervention in the writing process is evident through the following questions:

- How will an online discussion board help boys to flesh out their ideas more thoroughly, thereby leading to more prolific writing?
- How will written responses and feedback from their peers and teacher help strengthen their convictions by forcing them to adjust their thinking or defend their ideas, thereby leading to greater confidence in their writing?
- How will having to explain themselves in writing force boys to search for appropriate (possibly more powerful) vocabulary?

For the purposes of my research sub-question, the terms “prolific”, “confident” and “powerful” are defined as follows:

Prolific means fully-worded individual pieces of writing. Working with the notion of “fleshing out their ideas”, I am interested in how well the intervention encourages the boys to explain their ideas more fully in written form, making them more prolific by the act of using more words. This, in turn, would contribute to making the writers more powerful.

Confident means having a sense of certainty about one’s self as a writer and therefore feeling self-assured rather than insecure when embarking on given writing tasks. Once again, this would, in turn, make the writers more powerful.

Powerful is used in conjunction with the notion of impact. If boys are explaining themselves more fully, and if they are approaching writing with a feeling of confidence, then one may expect the writing to have greater impact. They have something to say and therefore want to use the best language they can to express their ideas.

Action Research

The methodology is that of action research for the following reasons:

- It is situation specific and therefore it enables you to examine your own situation.
- It is a participatory process and allows for input from all those involved.
- It allows for an ongoing process of self-evaluation where you appraise yourself and your own performance.
- It assumes that you already have a great deal of professional knowledge and can continue to develop this knowledge and improve your practice (Mills, 2007).

Context

Crescent School is located in Toronto, Canada. It is a grade 3 through 12 independent boys' school with a population of about 670 students; approximately half of that number being in the Upper School. The school's ethos rests on the core values of respect, responsibility, honesty and compassion. The school prides itself on its sense of community, and all staff members work towards creating strong relationships with our boys.

Literature Review

Through the process of reviewing literature for this action research, four main themes emerged that became increasingly relevant to my intervention. They are: (1) the *asynchronous* nature of a discussion board; (2) the *disinhibition* effect of a discussion board; (3) the importance of a social aspect to a discussion board; and finally (4) the significance of increasing the amount of writing done in order to improve that skill.

John Suler (2004) states that: "The nice thing about discussion boards is the 'asynchronous' nature of the communication." Discussion does not occur orally in real time and therefore students have a chance to formulate their ideas and think about their use of language before responding to discussion threads. Suler also reports that one of the drawbacks of this asynchronous nature is that a student may post an idea to which no one responds.

A second theme that comes through in both of Suler's articles and also in the action research is the 'disinhibition effect'. This is the notion of anonymity when writing online. Whilst we would all agree that this is true of such vehicles as public social forums and chat lines, disinhibition also prevailed in my classroom, where everyone knows each other. Suler explains that in the classroom, during an oral discussion, most eyes and ears are on the speaker; each movement and sound is duly noted. Similarly, the speaker sees every reaction of his listeners. He goes on to offer that: "Text communication offers a built-in opportunity to keep one's eyes averted" (Suler, 2004).

The third theme from the literature pertains to the social aspect of an online discussion board. A discussion board is an online community. Margie Martyn (2005, p. 62) explains that no community is successful if it is all work and no play. Students need to interact in a variety of ways, whether in class or online. There needs to be a "social energy" (Suler, 2004) which serves to help motivate the students as they interact and write.

Carl Nagin states in *Because Writing Matters* (2006) that: "writing is a complex activity; more than just a skill or talent, it is a means of inquiry and expression for learning..." (p. 3). Edmund McCarthy also discusses the complexity of writing in his article, *It Takes a Village to Raise a Writer* (2008). However, in his case he is referring to the ever-increasing forums for writing that are now available. He states that: "We are writing more, more often, to more people via more complex devices that require of us a capability of crafting cogent meaning more quickly" (p. 72). Both writers advocate enthusiastically for strong in-school writing programs which include an abundance of writing. Similarly in *Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing* (2004) there is a strong push for "ample in-class and out-of-class opportunities for writing..." This article goes on to state that: "...getting better at writing requires doing it – a lot" (2004). The implementation of a discussion board as the intervention for this action research served both concerns stated. It purposefully

introduced the students to a new forum for writing and, as was noted by the boys, it put them in a situation where they wrote – a lot!

Research Methods

THE PARTICIPANTS

For the purposes of this action research I focused on my Upper School grade 11 English class of 18 boys aged 15–17 years old. The boys worked with the intervention through the study of three works of literature, *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, William Shakespeare's *Othello* and George Orwell's *1984*. The class consists of boys with a range of abilities, but generally could be categorized as a strong group in terms of academic ability. I have a second class of grade 11s of a similar strength and had originally intended to use both classes as full participants in the research. Indeed both classes used the intervention equally. However, there came a point where I was overwhelmed with the prospect of being able to conduct qualitative research and to honour the voices of 36 boys. To relieve my own anxiety, I chose to focus on one of the classes and, yes, I chose the class responding most actively to the intervention.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE INTERVENTION AND PROCESS

My idea of using a discussion board as an intervention was generated in workshop sessions with the action research team at Lindesfarne College in New Zealand during the 2009 IBSC conference. I had never participated on a discussion board, let alone used one as a teaching tool, and whilst I am not nervous with technology or computers, I am by no means an advanced user. Given all of this, I knew that I would be entering this research with few preconceptions and an adequate skill-set, thus strongly in place to learn a great deal.

There are many programs designed specifically for discussion boards, but I decided to create a Google site. There were two main reasons for this choice, the first being that we were using a Google site as a means of communication for the action research team and so I was familiar with what it should look like and what it could do. I knew that it would work for my purposes. I also felt confident using a Google site because if I ran into problems I could rely on help from other members of the team. My second reason for using this application was that I could utilize other facets of the application in my lessons.

It took a good deal of experimentation in order to find the best way to effectively use the discussion board with the boys. This was clearly not going to be a case of if you build it, they will come, or more specifically, if you set up the program, they will write. Using my intervention wasn't a process of trial and error, but rather, of trial and not complete success. I reflected regularly and fine-tuned my methodology in order to achieve the lessons and learning I was looking for. I learned a great deal through the various stages of the evolution of the intervention.

Ultimately, my intervention using a discussion board was broken down into three stages:

Stage One: Following a lesson, I posted open-ended questions/discussion topics on the Google site. For homework the boys were required to do two things. The first was to post a response to the question and the second was to return to the site at a later time and respond to the posts of their classmates. Since I teach each class every other day, in my mind, the boys would write their own

responses one night, go back on the site the second night and respond to their peers, and then we would meet and discuss at our class the next day. The reality was that the boys responded to the topics (what they interpreted as the “real” homework) and then seldom went back to respond a second time. The few boys who did respond were mostly those who entered their original post later than others and so had a chance to read what others had said. For them, it wasn’t like doing the homework twice as they could do both parts at once.

When I asked why boys weren’t going back on to the site a second time, the most common response was that they had forgotten. At this point it was necessary to remind myself that the boys had seven other courses in addition to mine and in their minds the English homework was done. It was unlikely that this method of using the discussion board was going to be successful.

Stage Two: At this point I moved the discussion board out of the realm of homework and into the classroom, where I incorporated it as a tool for lessons. I designed lessons that required the boys to respond individually on the discussion board to a prompt/question, then stop writing and as a whole class discuss what had been written. The boys were on their own computers looking at the work and I had my own computer and use of a projector with which I projected the work. After a whole-class discussion of the various ideas that had been posted, the boys were asked to consolidate ideas and write a full response to a follow-up question. Upon the completion and posting of the follow-up, they were instructed to look at the various pieces of writing and once again we discussed what had been written. What this stage amounted to was online process writing. The boys brainstormed online, got feedback from others and then drafted paragraph responses. These lessons were successful in that the boys were now reviewing the work of their classmates and therefore learning from each other and they did a great deal of writing in a limited amount of time. However, the aspect of discussion was still missing from the intervention.

Stage Three: In these lessons, I moved the focus to the discussion. The boys began by writing a response to a prompt/question/posted article. I made sure that the topics were such that there would be real opinions revealed in the responses. Once that was completed the boys then had the rest of the computer session to read the responses posted by others and then agree, disagree, find holes, demand further explanation, etc. In these lessons I restricted them from speaking; if they had something to say, it had to be done online. It was this method of implementation that was ultimately successful in terms of the research question. The lessons were energetic. There was a great deal of writing happening and most importantly there was a great deal of discussion between the boys online.

Data Collection

Data was collected in the following ways:

- The boys completed a survey at the beginning of the year that focused on their attitudes towards writing and the styles of writing in which they regularly participate.
- In addition, I collected a set of candid and more detailed written, anecdotal responses from the boys in which they wrote about themselves as writers. This was also collected at the beginning of the year.
- I interviewed boys in a whole-class grouping.

- I observed and took field notes from this whole class debrief/discussion on the effect of the discussion board on their writing. Questions to the boys included, but were not limited to, the notions of “prolificacy”, confidence” and “power”.
- I video-taped a whole-class debrief after a discussion board lesson.
- I interviewed three boys individually.

Method of Analysis

The boys’ written responses were analyzed and categorized into umbrella themes and then re-categorized to address the notions of prolific, powerful and confident. I transcribed my field notes from the whole-class debrief and the individual interviews and the transcripts were subsequently verified by the boys for authenticity. This information was similarly categorized, as were the comments from the video-tape.

Results

PRE-RESEARCH DATA

As previously stated, I collected two types of data at the onset of the action research project: a survey and anecdotal responses from the boys. Having now been through the process, I realize that the initial survey was not as purposeful as it could have been because some of the questions were not specific to my intervention. There were two questions, however, that did prove to be helpful; they were: “When I don’t participate it is because... (Write a few sentences that finish this idea)”, and a question where the boys were asked to add any additional thoughts.

Some boys interpreted the first question as oral participation and some boys interpreted it as an in-class writing exercise. Either way, there were several commonalities in the responses. One group of boys felt that they didn’t have time to think through a given issue and therefore could not contribute to the discussion or write anything down in the amount of time given. A second group of boys explained that they sometimes weren’t sure of the purpose of the writing. A third set of responses focused on the fact that the boys were bored or did not care about the topic and so were not active in some discussions. A majority of the responses fell into a fourth group and that pertained to confidence. Boys in this category said that they felt that they didn’t have anything worthwhile to contribute or they were worried about expressing their opinion. Most stated that they lacked the confidence to say what they were thinking.

The anecdotal comments from the boys were excerpts from personal introductions that they wrote at the beginning of the year. They were required to include a couple of sentences that told me about their previous experience with English classes generally and with writing specifically. Here boys wrote about specific concerns with their writing such as grammar, word choice, length and concerns about the strength of their opinions and ideas. Boys said such things as: “*To me writing is pretty natural, but sometimes I don’t know what to put down on paper*” and, “*I tend to repeat the same words over and over, which has made my writing boring in the past.*” Another concern boys had was how long it took them to get motivated to write. One boy stated: “*...it always takes me a long time to get started... I will think up ideas but they are mostly bad ideas so I keep on thinking.*” In the majority of the responses and in their own words, the boys were concerned with being prolific, powerful and confident writers.

POST-RESEARCH DATA

As I neared the end of the designated action research time period, I interviewed boys twice in whole-class groupings and then interviewed selected boys individually. The boys interviewed individually were chosen because they belonged to one of the two following categories:

- They were already particularly strong student writers and I wanted to know whether or not they felt the intervention helped their writing further.
- They were identified, by me, as lacking confidence in writing at the beginning of the year and then became very involved and wrote a great deal during the discussion board lessons.

Key Findings

- The boys found the discussion board writing to be purposeful. This included their original posting and their discussion postings.
- The boys unanimously agreed that they wrote more during the discussion board classes than at any other time other than when preparing a major essay or assignment.
- It was necessary for the teacher to monitor the postings. The boys distinguished two main reasons for this. First, it was too easy for the style and form of the language to disintegrate into short forms and “txt tk”. Secondly, students who were weak writers worried that they would be practising their mistakes unless they were corrected and moderated during the sessions.
- The discussion board sessions were energy-filled and the boys enjoyed these lessons.
- The fact that their writing was going to be viewed and commented on immediately was significant for the boys.

Discussion of Findings in Terms of the Themes Identified

Asynchronous Nature: The asynchronous nature of the discussion board proved to be impactful for two reasons. First, students took their time to think about what they wanted to say and how they wanted to say it. And, since the boys were all writing at the same time, they all *spoke* even if someone else was writing the same idea. The boys were able to take as long as they needed to explore and to state their idea; no one else was speaking or waiting to speak.

Second, boys contributed to the discussion threads at their own speed. They were able to take the time that they needed to formulate their comments or rebuttals, again, without the pressure that someone else was waiting to speak and without the worry that the discussion had taken a new or different course. This was evident through the log of the posts, as many initial, formal pieces of writing were interspersed with already ongoing discussions. Most boys also took the opportunity to participate in more than one ongoing discussion thread which would not have been possible if it were not for the asynchronous effect.

There is one drawback to the asynchronous effect and that is that some participants may not receive comments on their posts. During online sessions there were posts that remained unanswered; however, writers were not sitting idle waiting for a response as they were already reading what someone else had written and were responding to that.

The Disinhibition Effect: The disinhibition effect was also important for many of the boys. One boy stated that working on the discussion board was *“less stressful, you’re not getting up in anyone’s face, no one’s yelling to be heard. It’s calm.”* This was specifically significant because this student had many different people respond to his initial stance and he defended his stance logically and calmly to each. The text box below contains only one of the three discussion threads in which he was involved:

Student 1 – Feb 4, 2010 2:46 PM –

[Student 2’s name] that you can say doublespeak is not dangerous in a free world may be true because people can decide for themselves what they want to hear and what they don’t. Double speak is NOT used in a free world in the book 1984 and is used to numb the people of Oceania from knowing the evils of their government and from wanting to turn on the government that has slowly taken their freedom away.

Student 2 – Feb 4, 2010 2:48 PM –

[Student 1’s name], if you read the rest of my post you would see that I wrote that even in a totalitarian government there will be a group of people who will realize what is happening and protest it, either publicly or privately.

Student 1 – Feb 4, 2010 2:51 PM –

[Student 2’s name], do you mean that people will protest a government that has no problem making them vaporize?

Student 2 – Feb 4, 2010 2:57 PM –

[Student 1’s name], yes that is what I’m saying. When I was in Iran in the summer the protests against the government were going on, hundreds of people had died and hundreds had been imprisoned, yet still people came out and protested. People that protest are not necessarily doing it for themselves, but for their kids and the generations to come.

He wasn’t “stressed” about defending his ideas to this boy or to the others who took issue with his post. He dealt with each one in its, and his, own time.

Boys also remarked on how many posts there were and how many there were from people who don’t normally participate in class oral discussions. The notion of shyness did come up in one interview and it was stated that the discussion board took away that shyness.

Social Aspect: First, I must reemphasize that the energy in the classroom while the boys were discussing online was palpable. One boy stated: *“I like how we talk to our peers. We talk to them in the way that we would [normally] talk to our friends but it is about stuff we are working on.”* As much as I insisted that the boys commented online only, they would often call out to each other once they had posted a comment or a rebuttal to that person’s work. The language was informal and occasionally teasing but it was also effective. I did not participate in the discussion during these focus lessons (I was monitoring) and I felt very much outside of the social world that was online at the time. During one lesson, one of the boys from the class was video-taping and I fully expected him to focus on that once he had written his initial paragraph. In fact, he regularly put the camera down and went back online in order to post and, I would suggest, be part of that community. The boys enjoyed these lessons immensely.

Quantity of Writing: Finally, in order to improve at anything, one must practise. As previously stated, the boys wrote a lot during these lessons. As I review the lessons now, several weeks later, I am amazed by the amount of writing and variety of ideas that were expressed in roughly sixty minutes. I am also impressed by the quality of the writing, specifically in the last session.

Discussion of Findings in Terms of the Research Question

Prolific: In my previous definition of this word, I focused on the idea of the boys more fully explaining their ideas. This did occur. The boys took the time to think about what they wanted to say for two main reasons. First, they knew that others would read their work as soon as it was posted and comment on it, so they took care to fully express themselves. It was also necessary for them to expand on their thinking when responding to the comments of their classmates. Secondly, they knew that they wouldn't miss out on other discussions that were taking place as they were all online.

There was also a sense of purpose in the writing. This seemed to occur for different reasons. As one boy stated, *"The stuff in the posts is our actual thoughts. Sometimes when I am writing an essay, I don't really care [about the topic]. In this case this is my actual idea that I care about."* In the initial survey many boys stated that they didn't write or participate because they didn't see or weren't sure of the purpose. On the discussion board, they had a purpose and they wanted to defend their ideas. This can be seen in the following excerpt:

Student 1 – Feb 4, 2010 2:36 PM –

Doublespeak is not a dangerous change to the English language in the long run, so long as humanity keeps logic and thought. Although it is dangerous in George Orwell's 1984, it is only because thought has been almost eliminated from society and the remaining "intelligent" people fear independent thinking. Because of this, they really do believe (or force themselves to believe) that what the language states is the truth (for example the politicians do really just "misspeak" instead of lie). However, in a modern more realistic society where thought is not only common (sometimes), but also encouraged, people would eventually just end up adopting this new language as their own. In their minds, people would associate "misspeak" and "lie" to be the same so really Doublespeak would just be a new language (or new words in a language) and people would not believe what the terms mean literally.

Student 2 – Feb 4, 2010 2:48 PM –

[Student 1's name], the problem with Doublespeak though is exactly what you said. Think of the problems of accountability between someone lying and someone misspeaking. They have two different meanings and that is why Newspeak is also bad because there are small but important subtleties between these words. Doublespeak would ruin the English language as definitions of words would be nullified or altered to fit a new more relevant meaning. There will always be people smarter than others who take advantage of the masses and Doublespeak will only make that easier. There is no group of people anywhere where one of them will not succumb to power and try to find a way to manipulate others.

Student 1 – Feb 4, 2010 2:49 PM –

[Student 4] and [Student 3]: i dont agree. the doublespeak terms would just replace common terms like i said earlier. its not like every single word is in doublespeak, only certain terms. like it's shown in the book, only things that the government (or the party) wants people to believe (or not believe) are turned into doublespeak terms.

Student 3 – Feb 4, 2010 2:55 PM –

[Student 1's name], eventually everything would turn into doublespeak, the government would realize the magnitude of their power over the people with doublespeak and exploit it, exactly why it is dangerous.

Student 1 – Feb 4, 2010 2:56 PM –

Ya but [Student 2's name], think of the term "gay" in our generation. People call each other gay all the time and although it is not politically correct, it also no longer associated completely with its original meaning of homosexual. We've adopted it into our language as a new general insult. It is in the same way that newspeak terms' real meaning would be realised by society and so people would know their real meanings.

Student 1 – Feb 4, 2010 2:59 PM –

but [Student 3's name], people wouldn't only use the language that the government was imposing on them, they'd always have their own terms and words

Student 3 – Feb 4, 2010 3:02 PM –

[Student 1's name], that is what would happen in the beginning, but eventually the people would become brainwashed, they would lose their ability to create their own terms and words, government would over time have complete control over the language

Student 2 – Feb 4, 2010 3:02 PM –

[Student 1's name], the thing is "gay" still relates to people being homosexual. Even if people use it in everyday life as a joke or an insult it still refers to the same thing. Real Doublespeak is changing a word or adding new meanings, whereas a term like "gay" is just a new insult.

Student 1 – Feb 4, 2010 3:09 PM –

[Student 2's name], although it does still have the same meaning in some cases, you've got to agree that it is not nearly the same as it would've meant 25 years ago and slowly we are changing its deffinition. Going back to the Doublespeak, people would do the same thing over time realising that they dont actualy mean what people want you to think they mean and would just become another term for the same meaning of the original. and [Student 3's name], in a realistic society people wouldn't allow themselves to be brainwashed no matter how much the government took control there would always be a resistance against it and people would know of this, causing them to have at least some anti-governmental idea's and so would have the ability to create their own terms and ideas.

Another factor that contributed to the boys writing prolifically is that the boys were very interested to see what others had to say about their posts. They shared with me their realization that the more they wrote and the more often they posted, the greater chance they had to receive responses. The prospect of a greater number of responses encouraged them to write prolifically.

Confident: As previously stated, I hoped that using the discussion board would help the boys gain a sense of confidence with their writing. There were two outcomes which suggested that confidence was increased. First, boys suggested that because everybody responded at the same time, a number of ideas were expressed simultaneously. The ability to see these ideas helped them to realize that their ideas were not inferior to those of others. Having a different idea or explanation didn't make it wrong. Conversely, boys realized that other students had ideas that were similar to theirs; they weren't way off-track. This realization also increased their confidence. One of the boys shared the following:

"When I write, I tend to blabber a lot and then I go back and cut out a lot; backspace and I keep second-guessing myself. I would rather take something out than take a chance with it being wrong. Blank pages are scary, being online [writing in a little box] feels faster."

I found his comment about a blank page interesting, especially considering that there is never a blank page when responding on a discussion board. It simply isn't set up to look that way. I asked this same boy if he felt that discussion board lessons made him feel more confident when he was preparing assignments. He was unsure at this point, but went on to say that, because he was practising his writing and others were giving him feedback, he believed his writing would get better. He also stated that it would be important for him to remember how he felt when writing on the discussion board and try and feel the same way when writing his next assignment.

Powerful: In my initial definition, I equated powerful with impact. The boys used such words as "better", "clearer" and "stronger". When asked if they thought that the use of the discussion board helped their writing become powerful, they replied positively and gave the following reasons:

- They know that others are poised to take issue with what they have written and so they are careful about how they word their ideas.
- They have ownership of their ideas and care about them.
- They are focused on the computer screen and aren't distracted.
- They take the time to think through their ideas as they write them. Very closely connected to this is the fact that writing takes more time than speaking and this helps them to formulate their ideas and thus they feel that their ideas are more valid.
- They are able to look at the ideas of others and this helps them to think through their own ideas.
- They are able to see the word choices and writing styles of others and learn from them.

Or, in the words of two of the boys, *"You have a purpose and you write with that purpose in mind"* and *"You had a chance to think out what you wanted to say and then, get it down."*

Conclusions

It has become clear from my observations and comments from the boys that the use of a discussion board does in fact help boys to become more prolific, confident and powerful writers. They practise a great deal of writing during the discussion board classes. The topics and ensuing discussions are purposeful for them and they want to expand on their ideas. The opportunity to explain their ideas more than once, in a given discussion, gives them the confidence to write

without worrying about getting it right. They have ownership of the ideas that they are discussing and want to present those ideas in the strongest possible manner. Immediate feedback allows them to correct and strengthen their wording right away. Having access to the ideas and writing styles of their classmates helps them to think through their own ideas and gives them writing models from which to learn.

Implications for Future Practice and Research

Certainly, I will continue to make use of discussion boards in my teaching. In fact, I have already started using them in my other classes. There are some issues which I still need to work on. For example, although the Google site worked well enough, it was difficult for the boys to follow the various discussions. I need to find a way to implement discussion threads; this may entail finding a completely different program to use.

Critical examination of the various lessons also reveals a bit of a one-off approach to them. The lessons were designed to address the research and they developed when considered from that perspective. However, the lessons could be prepared in a more backward-design approach so that each lesson will serve to flesh-out thinking points that could eventually contribute to a major piece of writing for the course.

I would also like to look into the prospect of evaluating the online work. I purposely left marking out of the equation for the research project as I didn't want that to be a motivator or an inhibitor. There is a great deal of literature regarding evaluating discussion board work and I am sure that will be helpful.

Delving into a new technology and having success with it has also given me the desire to try other programs and try new technologies. Embarking on such projects through the framework of research makes the challenge less daunting. Trying something new with the boys makes it a group effort. We work together to see what works, what doesn't, and what we can do to make it work successfully.

Action research allows students to be active participants in the design of their own learning; I appreciate the importance of this to my students. Additionally, action research, by its very nature, insists on a teacher being a reflective practitioner. Beyond the implications of this specific study, I have been revitalized by the process. The project not only helps the boys to improve their writing but it also allows me insight into the far-reaching minds of the grade 11 boys I teach.

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Face-to-Face, On- and Off-Line: Writing Conferences with Boys

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Abstract

Most guides to “writing workshop,” a common method of teaching writing in the USA, advise teachers to set aside several uninterrupted hours a week for writing, and emphasize the need for sit-down teacher-student writing conferences. This time requirement often discourages teachers in departmentalized schedules from adopting the workshop approach. However, the asynchronous and collaborative nature of 21st century social networking tools offer opportunities for student contact and conferencing that are not wholly dependent on time in class. Adopting both face-to-face methods and on-line methods in a modified writing workshop setting, the researcher asked how on-line and face-to-face writing conferences could be structured to help boys be more prolific, powerful, and confident writers.

By the end of the school year, the boys in this study were writing more, using more effective language, and were more confident as writers. The research called into question some of the researcher’s assumptions about boys as writers, about the meaning of writing workshop for boys and their teachers, and about the interaction itself between a boy and his teacher. The research suggests that writing conferences may act as catalysts to improving the written work of purposeful writers, rather than opportunities for transfer of expertise from teacher to student.

Introduction

The research question at the heart of this year-long investigation was: *How do short writing conferences, on- and off-line, help boys become more prolific, powerful, and confident writers?* Many new opportunities are emerging to change the ways we teach students to write. Social networking tools offer ways to engage students in and out of class, and to make more effective use of the knowledge base about the learning process and the learner. The writer’s workshop approach provides ways to individualize student learning, and to provide choice, purpose, and intentional writing practice. In addition, the differences associated with gender have come under increasing scrutiny, suggesting that boys are often more reluctant writers who do not revise their work. The single-sex classroom would seem to be an opportune setting for using new technologies and what we know about boy writers to craft a more boy-centered and effective writing approach.

Opportunities, however, rarely come unencumbered, and the dearth of available time in a departmentalized schedule means that the teacher-student writing conference at the heart of the workshop method is marginalized and abbreviated, and the time for exploration of 21st century technologies is likewise limited. In my modified writer's workshop in my 6th grade English classroom, I rarely have time to carve out extended time for writing, let alone meet with more than a handful of students before they must go to their next classes.

In considering possible avenues for action research, I considered a number of core questions: How could I help them, in the brief time we had together, to become more prolific, or in other words to write an increased number of pieces, write more frequently, and write at greater length? How could I encourage student writers to be more powerful—to write with greater ownership of topic, more sense of purpose and audience, and greater variety of expression? Finally, how could I encourage my middle school students, at a time when many of them were becoming more self-conscious about their writing and less inclined to write, to be more confident in choosing their topics and incorporating suggestions in their revisions? I began to wonder how I could combine these opportunities, that is, adapt social networking tools in our writer's workshop to provide more opportunities to meet with my students about their writing.

Literature Review

The writer's workshop, advocated by a large number of practitioners and theorists, is a common method of teaching writing in the USA (Calkins, 1994, Atwell, 1998, Fletcher and Portalupi, 2001). In this approach, students have considerable control over topic and genre, and work at their own pace, meeting briefly but regularly with the teacher and revising their work in response to the suggestions in those meetings. Although teacher-directed lessons are part of the instruction, mini-lessons are also short and are directed towards issues that arise from student writing (Atwell, 1998, Hicks, 2009). A thorough review of the research on the subject has shown that it results in better student writing (Pritchard and Honeycutt, 2004). Writer's conferences should be short and frequent (Atwell, 1998), and conferences for boys should be kept even shorter and more specific (Fletcher, 2006). All writers on the subject agree that time is a consideration in teaching writer's workshop, and most urge three or more uninterrupted hour blocks of writing time per week (Fletcher and Portalupi, 2001).

Allocating this much time is an unrealistic expectation in many classrooms, including the classroom which was the site of this research. However, emerging social networking technologies suggest a way to incorporate an approach to writer's workshop with the movement toward digital literacy in order to sidestep such constraints. These technologies, especially real-time collaborative text editors such as Etherpad and Google Docs, offer opportunities for collaboration that are not dependent on the sequential, real-time environment of the classroom (Bernard *et al.*, 2004). A great amount of the writing all people (adults and students) do these days is, in fact, already created with digital tools, and students who may be reluctant to write in conventional school environments are often more productive writers on-line (Witte, 2007, Albright *et al.*, 2002).

Boys in particular have positive attitudes toward computer use, and consider themselves more competent with computers than do girls (Shashaani, 1994). In addition, as writers, they tend to revise less, incorporate fewer craft elements, and want specific, concrete suggestions (Fletcher,

2006). They value themes not always affirmed in school writing, such as violence, suspense, and action, and are less willing to write at length about character analysis or close reading of texts than are girls (Newkirk, 2002). It would seem that a digital writer's workshop approach would be suited for boys, given the increased choice of topic and genre, the opportunity for engaging with technology, and the chance to increase the number and form of brief teacher-student conferences.

Context

The Haverford School, in Haverford, Pennsylvania, USA, is a college preparatory pre-K–12th grade day school for boys. Sixth grade is the first year of Middle School. The sixth grade English classroom meets in a seven-day rotation block schedule. The schedule provides one session of 70 minutes once every seven school days, but otherwise has 40-minute sessions for five out of the other seven days, in which to teach writing, reading, public speaking, grammar, and other language skills. The boys who come to sixth grade have considerable writing experience, although much of their writing has been on assigned topics and under deadline. Although the size of the section that participated in the research was relatively small (19 boys), the range of writing ability and style was considerable.

Research Approach

Research by teachers into their own teaching has been a growing movement in teacher education and in the professional development of teachers. A core idea in this approach is that teachers are “deliberative intellectuals who constantly theorize practice as part of practice itself” (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009, p. 2). Since teaching is by its nature context-specific, localized, and interactive, the assumption is that knowing and doing are dialectically joined. The approach in this study was, therefore, qualitative action research. Action research, according to Mills, is systematic inquiry by educators designed to gain information about teaching and learning in a specific setting. It improves insight and reflection, encourages change, and improves experience (Mills, 2006). A qualitative approach, which is descriptive and focused on the meanings of human interaction to the participants, is better suited to the small sample size of the individual classroom setting. Further, a qualitative approach is appropriate for teasing out meaningful questions and the specific meanings of interactions for the participants.

Research Methods

The focus of this study was one section of 19 boys ages 11–12. This section had a wide range of writers, from boys who struggled to start writing and had difficulty with spelling, to polished writers who produced final-draft quality in their first drafts. Most of the students in the section had attended the school for at least one year before they entered sixth grade.

Because of the limited time available in class, writing workshop was implemented in a selective fashion. I generally assigned a specific genre, for instance, and set due dates when it became clear that most of the students were close to completion, giving extensions to students who worked slowly. However, students had control over their topics and over the length of their writing, and the conferences (much of the time) were focused primarily on the purposes of the writer rather than the mechanics of the form.

The face-to-face writing workshop conferences proceeded in the English classroom as in previous years. During modified writing workshop, the students wrote for sustained periods in the classroom, and periodically met with the teacher to discuss their writing. All students were expected to revise their writing, and they frequently went through repeated revisions before they handed in their work.

The students were also introduced at the beginning of the year to Google Docs, and they all created Google Docs accounts. This cloud-based document management web tool allows students to create and share documents, and provides for more than one person to edit these documents. Using this application, students created their written pieces and shared them with me. I responded to their writing with reactions and suggestions, using a different colored font so that they could easily distinguish what I had written.

For reasons having to do with the availability of technology in the classroom, for the first part of the year the Google Docs collaboration took place primarily through homework, and in January the transition was made to using it in the classroom workshop.

Over the course of the research period, students produced a large number of documents, some of which went through a number of drafts until posting or publication. Others, mostly homework assignments, were treated as communications, to which the teacher responded. Such homework communications included letters to the teacher, reflections on completed assignments, analyses of literary works, and ideas for future projects. These assignments, when created using Google Docs or e-mailed to the teacher, sometimes turned into opportunities for impromptu on-line conferences. By the time the classroom made the transition to a classroom digital writer's workshop in January, the students and teacher had already created a digital homework environment by default.

Data Collection

With a sample of 19 boys, I was able to collect a rich diversity of data, including videos of interviews, writing samples in various stages of revision, and student responses to the process. Because of the "revision history" feature of Google Docs, I could track every stage in the creation and revision of some documents—from the first few lines to the first draft through my written comments, student revisions, further comments, and final versions. In addition, I kept a regular journal of the research process in order to keep track of emerging analytical categories and the changes in the research process itself as I adjusted my plans to deal with the realities of classroom work. At the end of the project, the students reflected in writing on their preferences for digital versus face-to-face conferences, and these reflections served as a key set of data.

The final data set for each student by the end of the study included the following:

- Eight videos of brief one-to-one conferences and transcripts of the conversation;
- Brief personal experience narratives ("Memoirs") for each student, both in first draft and in final form after conferencing;
- Narratives about a whole-class field trip ("Hawk Mountain Story") in first draft and final form;
- Essays about a favorite poem ("Favorite Poem Essay") in draft and final;

- Essays about a personal hero (“Hero Essay”) from first draft through revisions to final form;
- Samples of homework assignments including reading letters, assignment reflections, literary analyses, and descriptions of ideas (“Homework”);
- Fiction about places the students had never been, incorporating research facts about the locations (“I-Search”);
- Brief written student reflections “Conference Reflections” about the conferencing process; and
- Online research journals in blog form (“Research Journal”).

Data Analysis

From the beginning of the project, analysis was ongoing, and adjustments were made to practice based on the patterns and concepts that emerged from the analysis. For example, during the initial face-to-face conferences about the memoirs, it rapidly became clear that almost all students responded best to probing questions about their purposes for choosing the anecdote they were relating, and that asking them to make that purpose more explicit produced more focused detail in their stories. I therefore incorporated questions about purpose into every face-to-face conference.

Such formative analyses were woven into the research process, resulting in increasing individualization of my comments for different students, depending on their writing approach, and substantially different approaches to the conference process depending on the time of the year, the nature of the written piece, and the development of the boys as writers.

The research journal was a key catalyst in this process, and allowed for the emergence of important understandings during the year. For instance, it only occurred to me in December that despite the lack of in-classroom technology, I had already substantially implemented a digital writing workshop environment through homework—before that, I was simply concerned with putting elements into place in preparation for the time when I could start the “real” study.

I arranged the student data chronologically by individual, so that at the first stage of the summary read-through I was able to follow the progress of a student writer and the changes in my responses to their writings. The first read-through was conducted prior to the completion of the conference reflections, and the second was conducted afterwards, resulting in a change in the analytical lens through which I was viewing the data.

Results

Improvement in writing. On the first pass through the data, one thing was immediately apparent. The boys had indeed become more confident, powerful, and prolific writers. They clearly moved in their written work over the course of the year from brief, unelaborated one-paragraph memoirs (or rather, enumerations of events) to extended narrative I-searches incorporating research, strong story structure, first-person narrators, dialogue, and action, and often several pages long. The progression was steady throughout the year. Clearly, they had become, at least in the context of this classroom, much more prolific, clearly more confident, and more powerful writers. This was consistent for all students.

For example, JK, the weakest writer in the section, had to be walked through his first essay, paragraph by paragraph, with one-to-one conferences and on-line suggestions, resulting in a final product that was stiff and barely readable. Yet by the end of the research period, JK produced a five-page story about a thriller set in New York City and Dubai, incorporating his research well and finishing the story in his spare moments even after the time for writing was over. NB, a much more able writer at the beginning of the year, produced only a spare paragraph for his first memoir but wrote a five-page story with complicated dialogue and research on Alaska in the spring.

Variation in conference structure. The conferences themselves, however, varied widely in format, length, and content, dependent on time of year, time available, the needs of the individual writer, the climate of the classroom, whether the conferences were face-to-face or on-line, and the teacher's patience. In the beginning of the year, face-to-face conferences were about three to five minutes long, and consisted of reading the piece aloud to the student, asking what stood out for him and what he wanted to get across to his reader, and suggesting that he act on the answers he had given. The responses to homework usually consisted of communications in the form of brief letters (literally starting "Dear ____" and ending, "Yours, Dr. T") written in a different font and color (usually blue) so that the student could immediately recognize and distinguish the teacher's comments. These comments were usually in the nature of thoughtful responses to the content and questions for further elaboration, with occasional suggestions for following directions, and only occasionally resulted in back-and-forth discussions within the document, though students clearly read the comments, sometimes responding to them in person.

Responses to conferences. The changes the boys made in their writing in response to my comments included: changing the order or elements; expanding, adding, or moving paragraphs; inserting sentences; varying the language; fixing the quotation marks, the font, the spelling, the capitalization, and the formatting; and taking out materials. Some students deleted the comments after reading them, suggesting that they valued the integrity of their work. Some students deleted the comments without making changes, whereupon I promptly reverted the document to an earlier version, putting the comments back. With the poem essays and hero essays, I experimented with the "comment" function in Google docs, but settled on the font-and-color writing as the default mode. As with the homework responses, boys only occasionally responded to my comments directly, but made it clear (by anxious requests in class) that they waited impatiently for my reactions and wanted to read them. Many seemed to perceive few boundaries between on-line and face-to-face communication, and continued conversations in class that had begun on-line.

Increasing individualization and adaptation. As the year progressed, there were fewer boundaries between digital conferencing and face-to-face conferences for all of us, and I confess that I have only fragmentary data in many cases about the complete conference process, because it often jumped back and forth from on-line suggestions to in-class questions and back again. Further, different students had different needs. Some (like WP, who made frequent false starts on his writing before settling on a final version) needed only a sort of "keep pedaling" injunction on-line for a complete version to emerge, usually after the informal due date. Others (like JK, who struggled with writing and was not a strongly independent learner) needed frequent face-to-face meetings and on-line encouragement to produce anything at the beginning of the year. CG, an able student who had frequent absences, responded well to mild on-line nagging and general suggestions about focus such as: *"The quote is a good start, but the sentence after that is a little*

confusing. Keep up the good work. I have highlighted a couple of changes I would like you to make." Others, such as KP, needed specific to-do lists:

"A very knowledgeable and thorough essay. It needs a thesis statement in the first paragraph, and it needs to be double spaced. Then I'm going to be evil and tell you to cut the whole thing down :) for instance, you have way too many details in your first paragraph. How many of them are necessary in order to introduce your subject, give a little background, and explain your thesis? Also, what do his brothers (in the second paragraph) have to do with his heroism? Focus, focus, focus. I bet you could get rid of a bunch of stats in this essay that don't support your thesis. Finally, you need more than one source in your bibliography."

It appeared to me, as the year progressed, that students considered my suggestions thoughtfully and responded to them fairly quickly and thoroughly, because their writing moved from draft to final with what appeared to be consistent improvement. However, on the initial read-through I noticed that often boys only took some of my suggestions, ignoring others, and interpreted the suggestions they did take (both on- and off-line) very selectively. In fact, it was rare for students to take all my suggestions. Since my focus was on producing a finished product rather than on grading by a rubric, it was not until I graded the hero essay that I began to notice this pattern. My summative assessments of their papers took on a decidedly peevish tone in some cases, as for example:

"I put some comments in this essay last week, and asked you to make some changes, but it does not seem that you made the changes."

What the boys said about conferences. I began to ask, "What is happening here? Why do the students show such a clear improvement in their writing even though they seem to resist taking suggestions?" The final data set, which was the written conference reflections, provided considerable food for thought and a way into answering that puzzle. I asked the students to answer in writing the following questions:

What kind of conference (Google Docs or face-to-face) works best for you? Why? Or are they good for different things? What kind of comments help you the most? When you have a suggestion from a teacher, how do you use it?

After my first read-through of the responses, I wrote in my research journal, *"It's as if today's little writing sample was the small silver key that opens the big lock."* First, the differences in their answers sparked insight into the differences among my students and why, over the course of the year, I increasingly used different methods for different students. In their written reflections, the boys did not indicate a clear preference for one mode or the other, with a slight majority preferring on-line, some preferring face-to-face, and a number saying both were good. For instance, WM started out saying he preferred face-to-face conferences, but then added: *"face to face and GD are equal sometimes you need one sometimes you need the other."*

Nonetheless, some interesting questions arose from their expressed preferences. Two types of boys liked on-line conferences. One was an independent, confident writer with good reading skills and good grades who preferred to do his work on his own time and did not need much direct interaction with the teacher. MM commented that on-line conferencing is *"fast, easy, and always available."* The other type is a writer who has weaknesses, like JM, GN, and JW. JM said, *"I like google docs confrences [sic] because I don't feel as pressured."* While GN wrote: *"you can konw [sic] what*

you Did wrong and How you can fix it all at the same time.” JW, revealingly, confessed: *“I like google docs because I make a lot of spelling mistakes so im [sic] not inbarased [sic].”* For two of those boys, face-to-face conferences seem to carry social consequences, while GN, who despite his spelling is a very confident boy, really belongs to the first group. Indeed, he added, *“face to face is not fast enough.”*

The group who preferred face-to-face, though smaller in number, seemed to have a wider variety of responses. Some boys who preferred face-to-face conferences liked the immediacy of it. AF said, *“on google docs, you might ask a question, and I won’t get to it for two days.”* Some preferred that type of interaction and felt it was more valid, SK said, *“I am actually talking to the teacher”* and TK said, *“I just like to hear what the person is saying.”* CM pointed out that with face-to-face, *“I understand the other person better.”* KP, a capable but sometimes impatient student, said that with face-to-face conferences, *“I can receive information sooner and I can react faster.”* He and GN both preferred different modes for reasons of speed, which says something about what they considered faster, working on a computer or talking in a class.

The boys who said that both were good seemed to believe they were good for different purposes. MM said that face-to-face was *“good because you are getting direct feedback.”* GN said *“Relly [sic] there are no differentces [sic]. I suggest that you Do Both next year.”* RT said that face-to-face conferences were better for *“an essay that will be posted out in a hall, and GD is useful for an essay just sent to the teacher,”* an interesting comment.

Some of the boys were very vague about what kind of comments they liked best, but there was a common thread. Small, simple, concrete suggestions were the easiest. Said CG, *“Fixing little parts at a time. Not everything at once.”* KP said, *“Comments that help me the most are the ones that go into detail but not immense detail,”* and RT liked the ones where *“you tell me specific things I need to change, not the overall view (eg. Take this word out).”* They seemed to appreciate the comments, even when they were not specific about what kind of comment. RT added: *“I use your suggestions in 2 ways. 1, if I think the suggestion is good, I use it. If I don’t like it, I try to figure out my own solution.”*

DS, on the other hand, explained, *“I always change everything the teacher always says, because they are usually right, and would not try to intentionally sabotage you.”*

One student, SY, claimed, *“When I have a suggestion from a teacher I do what the comment tells me to do.”* I must point out that the reverse of this statement is actually true. SY’s most common response to conferencing, whether face-to-face or on-line, was to delete the comment or smile and say, *“But I like it that way.”* He generally disagreed with any and all suggestions for improving his writing.

Yet SY was merely a very salient example of a typical independence combined with nominal compliance. All the boys seemed to have it to some degree. DF put their basic philosophy the most succinctly, arguing for using Google Docs as *“the middle school crutch for everything... I love this program because it gives you everything you need to creat [sic] an A+.”*

Discussion

Consistent with a qualitative approach, the answers to the initial research questions seemed to raise further questions. If the students in this study were clearly more prolific, confident, and powerful writers at the end of the year, if despite the varying structure of the conferences they appeared to value teacher suggestions and input, how could that be reconciled with the fact that they generally preferred (and used immediately) only some of the teacher suggestions, particularly the more surface-oriented ones such as choosing a different word or running spell-check?

One reasonable interpretation has to do with the sense of audience and the focus on purpose that was a consistent feature of my teaching from the beginning of the year. In my modified writing workshop approach, I very rarely conducted an “assign, mark, and grade” model of writing for English class. From the first conference and the first homework assignment, the focus was always on writing as communication rather than academic performance. In the face-to-face conferences, I asked students about their purposes for selecting topics and made suggestions about making that purpose more evident and persuasive. I responded to homework as a reader who was reacting to the content, writing my on-line comments in the form of a “letter” to the student and, when I made suggestions about mechanics such as spelling or punctuation, framing them as a plea for clarity in communication rather than as a teacher correcting errors. In essays and stories, my on-line comments addressed focus or thesis and assumed a purposeful writer rather than a passive and obedient student. Students, treated as independent agents, may have assumed that identity with alacrity and felt empowered to pick and choose, and reserved the suggestions about thesis and focus for consideration when starting later pieces. If this interpretation is correct (and it may be, partially), it is a desirable outcome. Most writing workshop advocates urge this stance.

However, another possibility is that students, at a very concrete stage in their development, found it too difficult to make the more substantive changes I suggested, ones that dealt with thesis and focus. This would suggest that I need to be either more direct or more structured in my suggestions, and I should meet the students’ need for clarity with specific, concrete suggestions and greater accountability for the incorporation of suggestions into the final product. Some of the clear improvement in their writing could simply be related to a high-volume, high-choice, audience-and-purpose focused writing environment coupled with normal child cognitive development over the course of the year, rather than to any salient characteristics of the conference environment.

Conclusions

Both on-line and face-to-face conferences varied in structure, frequency, length, and content through the year, from student to student, and from written piece to written piece. The boys in this sample enjoyed the writing process, took more control over their writing, produced a greater number of written pieces, improved the variety and correctness of their work, and reflected thoughtfully on the process. The conferences seemed to help boys begin to write and to have the confidence in themselves to make decisions about their writing, but they had less of an effect on the revision process. It was not indicated that the specific suggestions about mechanics, focus, or structure in on-line or face-to-face conferences had much effect. Instead, boys seemed to take the conferences as a sort of ready-made audience, providing a chance to have their writing read and an opportunity to consider themselves as writers. It was as if the most powerful message they heard in the conferences, both on- and off-line, was a focus on purpose and audience, and a respect for the role of the writer.

Implications for Practice

Most approaches for writing workshop include ways for keeping track of student work and the process by which work is drafted, conferences are scheduled, revisions are made, and final versions are edited and published, so that student performance can be tracked and ultimately assessed. This focus on accountability does not mean that the “assign, mark, grade” mentality lingers intractably within the process writing movement, but it does indicate that teachers equate the writer’s willingness to take teacher suggestions with progress in writing. The results of this study suggest that willingness to take teacher suggestions may not always indicate that progress. Instead, the converse may be true. As young students become independent members of a writing community, and as they gain an increasing sense of audience and purpose, they may choose to focus on only those aspects of a writing task that concern them, rather than on the aspects a teacher may be most concerned with. Thus, while they become more confident writers, I am concerned that they may also miss out on some opportunities to learn important skills.

When I assigned the final reflection in class, there was barely enough time in the period left for the boys to write. Yet they dug in and started writing, producing a surprising quantity of well-organized prose in less than four minutes, some of them staying behind to finish what they had to say. While they were writing, three different boys asked me at different times to put the word “convenient” on the board so they could spell it correctly. In other words, they were confident, prolific, empowered writers who had something to say but trusted me to act as a resource. I suspect that the solution to my concern about skills may lie in patience and in listening to what they ask of me.

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Reflection

This has been a rich and rewarding school year. My original research plan seemed simple and straightforward, with extra time built in for roadblocks. I planned to have data collection completed by November, and to have extensive time over winter break for analysis and writing. However, the process rapidly took unexpected turns. About a month before school began, I found out that the technology I assumed would be available would not be purchased after all. I used Google Docs for a number of homework assignments, implementing only the face-to-face part of writing workshop in the classroom. Many students faced problems logging on from home. Without the support and advice of the IBSC action research community, I do not think I would have been able to complete it in a meaningful fashion.

The school finally found funds and provided the necessary computers in January. By then, however, I had somehow instituted a systematic, home-to-school, ongoing on-line asynchronous writing conference environment based on Google Docs. My students were producing a large quantity of short written homework assignments, and I was often responding to these assignments well before my students arrived for class. My students became accustomed to the idea that I would read and respond to their writing immediately. I didn't really realize that was what I was doing.

The digital and one-to-one writing environments merged thoroughly, and as I commented in my research journal, my job was not made any easier, nor did it free up my time. A few times my comment on a student's writing was, "Go to bed," because he and I were both on-line catching up on our work after ten o'clock.

Even if it takes the wind out of my sails a little bit to realize that my more transformative comments don't meet with their approval, the boys express themselves so clearly—and how confident they are! In fact, more than anything, what stands out is how autonomous and independent their thinking is.

Yet what I introduced this year has clearly had an effect on their writing and on their ability to get things done. It suggests that the boys need to be surrounded and immersed in something, for it to become second nature, so surrounded that they don't notice it is part of the environment. The atmosphere I created of on-line conferencing is invisible to the boys, I suspect. They don't realize any more that it's something I'm doing, or that it's anything out of the ordinary to "share" a document with a teacher and have the teacher write on it on-line. Nor do they need to, and I don't need them to. It's not about me. As Newkirk says, the essentially narcissistic "grandiose, transformative model of teaching" neglects the role of students and keeps us from seeing them as they are"(Newkirk, 2009).

“You’re Not the Boss of This Story”: Collaboration and Competition in Boys’ Writing

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Abstract

During the 2009–10 school year, my sixth-grade humanities students at St. Mark’s School of Texas took part in an action research project sponsored by the International Boys’ Schools Coalition (IBSC). The project addressed the broad research question, “How can we help boys become prolific, powerful and confident writers?” Each member of the Action Research team was to implement a specific type of “intervention” in his or her classroom and observe the results of that strategy on student writing. The specific research question that I explored was “How can collaborative writing projects help boys become more prolific, powerful, and confident writers?” In the context of my particular study, I defined these terms in the following way. Prolific (or fluent) writers are able to explain their ideas in written form using abundant detail and fully realized commentary. Powerful (or competent) writers are able to fulfill their purposes effectively by using language in a way that impacts their target audience. Confident writers are able to approach a writing task without fear, anxiety, or hesitation because they are sure that they have the mental tools necessary to produce an effective writing piece.

During the project, the boys in my class wrote four formal, multi-draft collaborative writing pieces: a short story, a persuasive essay, an expository piece with narrative elements, and a literary analysis.

Both anecdotal evidence and direct feedback from these student research participants suggest that boys of this age (10–12) benefit greatly from collaborative writing experiences. The ease, confidence, and enjoyment with which these students are now writing contrasts dramatically with their uncomfortable reluctance and limited writing output at the beginning of the year. They have also gained considerable skill in negotiation and communication. The boys feel that they have improved their grammar skills, their ability to choose words aptly, and their facility with varied sentence structure. They are also far more willing to revise and edit their writing. Most of these writers have made considerable strides towards the mastery of collaborative writing and co-authoring, while also gaining writing fluency, confidence, and competence.

Literature Review

Several texts offered important insights into the nature of boys' writing, the value of shared authorship in both the classroom and the workplace, and the mechanics of the collaborative process. Helen Dale (1997) defines both collaborative writing and co-authoring as "meaningful interaction and shared decision making and responsibility between group members in the writing of a shared document" (p. x). She makes several salient points about the value of co-authoring: because collaborative writing is a social activity, students truly begin to understand the concept of writing for a particular audience, sometimes for the first time; writing with a group allows writers an opportunity to examine closely their choice of language and gives them access to a critical audience who will evaluate that choice of language; collaborative writing tends to include ongoing revision as a natural part of the process; it helps students prepare for the often collaborative nature of writing in the workplace; and "by composing together, students observe others' minds at work, as co-authors reveal their thinking strategies and model their writing processes" (p. xi). On a different level, a collection of essays on collaborative writing edited by James S. Leonard (1994) examined the scholarly basis on which the concept of collaborative writing is founded. The editors of this volume argue that little published writing exists that is *not* collaborative, given both the strong influence of editors on the written word and the exchanges of ideas that writers have with their peers during the process of composition. The author of one article in the book states: "The act of collaborative writing...openly critiques the isolationist paradigm [the idea that the individual author writing alone is most effective]" (Leonard and Wharton, 1994, p. 32). The same authors note the positive nature of conflict and competition in the collaborative writing process, stating that "collaboration is the bargaining process—strategy, play, gamesmanship—by which a multiplicity becomes 'coherent.' And while all are enriched, the 'singleness' of the result belongs to no one individual" (Leonard and Wharton, 1994, p. 33). Another author included in this compilation notes that "writers who collaborate aren't just exchanging ideas on a sheet of paper; they're struggling to create shared understandings and shared expressions" (Schrage, 1994, p. 21). And Ralph Fletcher (2006), in his groundbreaking text *Boy Writers*, celebrates the pitfalls and joys of teaching writing specifically to boys. All of these ideas intrigued me even further about the possibilities of growth and learning for my students in a classroom that welcomed collaborative writing and co-authoring.

Rationale for Study

Boys need motivation for writing that is authentic, active, imaginative, results-based, and fun (Fletcher, 2006). When they perceive their writing as merely an exercise meant for an audience of one—the teacher—and as being done for the purpose of pleasing or impressing that teacher, their writing tends to be brief, sterile, voiceless, and general.

Another good reason to investigate the effectiveness of collaborative writing in the classroom is that both boys and girls will most likely need the ability to write collaboratively as they enter the workplace. Helen Dale (1997) observes that, “surveys of those in the professions reveal that between 75 to 87 percent of respondents sometimes collaborate in writing” (p. 21). She also states that: “students who have had no preparation in co-authoring will be unprepared for some writing tasks in the workplace” (p. 21).

The general tendency of boys is to be both collaborative and competitive. Fletcher advises teachers of writing to provide their boys with “A strong social component—the boys work together, side by side, with lots of ‘cross-talk’” (Fletcher, 2006, p. 149). Dale (1997) states the benefits of the social interaction required by collaborative writing this way: “Through co-authoring, students learn to cooperate and negotiate, skills which are invaluable in other situations” (p. 21). There exists strong evidence that writing collaboratively at least part of the time in the classroom helps students to gain both motivation and confidence: “It [collaborative writing] transforms the usually lonely endeavor of writing by reestablishing its social framework and demystifies the process at the same time” (Dale, 1997, p. 55).

Assumptions

I made several assumptions about boys and learning when I undertook this research. First, I have observed that boys often dislike writing, especially writing that must be revised and edited, because they do not consider it an “active” pursuit. Ralph Fletcher (2006) quotes a fifth grader who put it like this: “Boys want to just get the writing done fast so they can go outside and play sports” (p. 5).

I have also observed that boys prefer writing about action to writing about thinking and feeling. Fletcher (2006) urges the teachers of boys to “embrace boy writing in all its grit and glory” (p. 7). This “grit and glory” may, and almost certainly will, involve violent imagery and actions. According to a study by Shelley Peterson cited in Fletcher (2006), “female writers wrote more about relationships and emotions in their stories, and males wrote more about violence and action” (p. 22).

I also assumed that boys enjoy collaboration and greatly prefer to work together on school assignments. And, in fact, research tells us that in essence, writing “is a social process” (Dale, 1997, p. 13). In addition, I assumed that boys enjoy and profit from competition, and that adding the element of competition in the collaborative writing environment would increase the students’ interest in the writing projects. Kao, Lin, and Sun (2008) observe that competition increases the students’ level of motivation during writing projects.

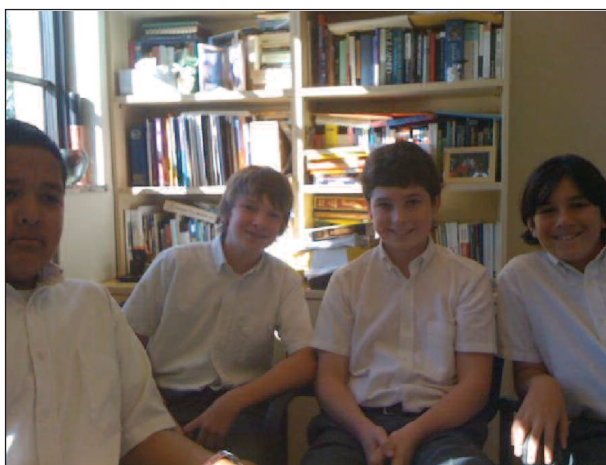
Last, I made the assumption, bolstered by my reading on digital literacy, that students would become more prolific and, perhaps, more confident writers if they used computer word processing and on-line writing sites such as Etherpad, instant messaging and “chats” (Tapscott, 1998). These assumptions informed the shape of the research project.

Research Approach

The approach adopted by the IBSC research group was action research, a method that allows teachers to examine their own practices and to experiment with changes that impact their work in a positive way. Teachers involved in action research think about their work and find practical ways to improve their teaching. The research begins with a question that focuses on the practice the researcher wishes to examine. It continues with a review of available literature, which is followed by a plan for implementation of a change in practice, or “intervention.” Data gathering and analysis follow, and the researcher draws conclusions which impact his or her continuing practice of the intervention strategy.

Research Participants

The boys who participated in this study were 16 sixth-graders in a humanities class at St. Mark’s School of Texas, a selective college preparatory school. Some of these students came into the class as confident writers with large vocabularies and some expertise in sentence structure; others showed a considerable fear of writing; still others were hesitant and uncomfortable writers because of their flawed command of grammar and syntax. All were limited by their experience and developmental level to writing short pieces that contained little organization or sense of voice.



Data Collection

I designed the research project to take place at intervals during a full school year and to be integrated with the students’ regular course of study in Humanities 6. I first obtained permission from the boys’ parents to have them participate in the research study and explained to them the rationale behind this experimental collaborative approach. During the first part of the school year, I planned nearly all of the grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure activities of the class so that the boys would be working together in small groups or pairs whose makeup varied from day-to-day. This process gave me the opportunity to see which boys worked particularly well together and which boys were reluctant to share responsibility for writing, and to develop a safe and secure classroom dynamic for these developing writers.

Activities

TERROR AND MAYHEM IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM: WRITING A “SCARY” NARRATIVE

At this point, the boys were ready to undertake their first major collaborative writing piece, which was to write a “scary” story. I chose this assignment because of the high interest level boys have in writing action pieces. The students’ first step was to create the settings; next, the characters; then to think about the conflicts and themes they wanted to embed; and finally, to create the plot. They then took these preliminary steps and combined them, with much debate and negotiation, into full-blown stories by typing them in the computer lab. At that point, the groups made appointments to conference with me, and we line-edited the stories and shared our commentary about both the stories and the process. Next, the boys went back to the computer lab, made the changes, and inserted descriptive phrases and varied sentence structures into their writing. After that, we had a jigsaw activity where they got to read their stories aloud to the other groups. They printed the stories, made one illustration each to be included in the published product, and submitted the stories for assessment.

RESEARCH AND EXPOSITION ON THE WORLD’S ANCIENT RIVER VALLEYS

The next multi-draft collaborative project began a few weeks later. The students were studying the world’s ancient river valleys and formed four groups of four to research different river valleys and their ancient cultures. Each member of the group had a specific task: one was the project manager, and the other three gathered information through Internet research. The project manager was responsible for creating a PowerPoint presentation of the research. The four group members communicated through e-mail. When the PowerPoint was complete, the group presented their research to the class. Next, the same groups went back to the computer lab, where all four boys in each group were given access to an Etherpad website which contained a chat space and a writing space where each student could contribute to a writing piece at the same time. Their assignment was to write a “Day in the Life” piece about a boy who had lived in that river valley civilization. All details were to be realistic and research-based. After these pieces were drafted, each group conferenced with me, received suggestions for revision, redrafted their pieces, and polished grammar and mechanics with the assistance of peers from different groups. The project culminated with a “read-around” of all of the groups’ “Day in the Life” pieces.

THE PROGRESSIVE PERSUASIVE ESSAY: WHOLE-GROUP COLLABORATIVE ARGUMENTATION

The third multi-draft collaborative writing piece took a different direction. The boys did prewriting collaboratively with their classmates, building paragraphs to support or challenge an assertion. We did this in the computer lab, with each boy writing a paragraph of evidence, then changing to a different computer to work on another person’s essay. After they had finished prewriting, they read all of the preliminary pieces, then appropriated any evidence they liked (from anyone’s paper) to write an individual essay supporting or challenging the same assertion. The individual students had writing conferences with me and revised their work into polished drafts. A read-around day, with written student commentary on each essay, completed our project.

THE LITERARY ANALYSIS ESSAY: COLLABORATIVE POETRY ANALYSIS

The last collaborative writing project, which took place during the final week of April, was an essay analyzing a piece of poetry. Students in groups of four used a “Piratepad” site to write a formal analysis of a poem’s diction, imagery, details, and rhythms. Workshopping, conferencing, and polishing activities completed this project.



Analysis and Findings

I analyzed several kinds of data to complete this research project. Among them were the boys’ answers to a written questionnaire; my own observations, recorded in journal form; photographs; and post-project interviews with the boys.

In the post-project questionnaire, the students expressed candidly both their enjoyment of collaborative writing and their understanding that writing collaboratively, by its very nature, generates controversy and conflict that then must be negotiated and resolved. They seemed to feel, for the most part, that this conflict was a problem, but my perception was that the collaborative process was an opportunity for the boys to practice the skills of problem-solving and conflict resolution. In each collaborative group, some conflicts occurred, but all were successfully resolved by the time the final product was edited and polished. A few of the students had a negative experience with collaboration, feeling that their ideas were not included by the group and that they preferred to write alone because they would have autonomy over the process. A selection of the boys’ responses follows.

When I write with a group, I feel...

“as though my ideas can be expressed and reviewed as no boy can do alone. Ideas can be merged and all together the collection can be an eloquent story.” (Mitchell)

“comfortable and encouraged. While writing collaboratively, I can learn from my friends’ writing skills and apply them to my own writing. It is even better when I am in a group of good friends and great writers. I don’t feel pressure; I can relax and write an A+ paper.” (Brannan)

“kind of caged in because I’m not fabulously liked, and when I present an idea, it’s normally dismissed with a “No way—that’s stupid!” or “No, that’s not good at all.” It’s never really

what I want the story to be like. Though I try to compromise, it's still not fun when you don't get to put in any input." (Matthew)

"better with my writing...if I have an idea about something, but I can't put it into words, another person can help me." (Jackson)

"confident because if I make a mistake, there will be someone to correct me. I also feel disputatious because I have to debate over good and bad ideas. Working in a group makes me feel proud because some of my ideas would become an essential asset to the story." (Kevin)

The things I like about writing with other boys are...

"that it is fun and simple to write with them. They listen to you, but also add their own twists to what you said." (Greyson)

"sharing ideas, and trying to make good sentences with a variety of phrases without completely destroying the concept." (Mitchell)

"We can...include violence that girls would probably not like. It also seems easier to mix and match our ideas so everyone gets to include their ideas. I also like that we were able to chat on one of the projects." (Phillip)

"We can let our imaginations run wild." (Mathew)

"sharing ideas with them. I love sitting and bouncing ideas from one person to another." (Jake)

The things I dislike about writing with other boys are...

"the arguments we sometimes have. When we have them it is full-out chaos; we show no mercy. Although we may argue, we at least finish the story most of the time, and when we do argue, I think the story actually turns out better, because people bring up their view and it might be extremely different." (Greyson)

"when my ideas aren't used and when I get distracted. Sometimes other people in my group don't like my ideas and reject them. Even though these things happen and give group writing a bad side, it is overall good." (Jackson)

"my team always argued and pointed a finger at me if something went wrong. It wasn't my fault for everything. I mean some things were, but not everything." (Mathew)

"some really good ideas can get left behind. Also, when you see a story in your mind, that picture can be totally different from the picture in another person's mind." (Aidan)

I feel that my writing this year has changed in the following ways:

"It has become stronger and more developed than before this year. All the writing practice we did helped to strengthen all parts of a sentence, descriptions, and story writing. This year has improved my writing 100%." (Greyson)

"Writing about images has allowed me to be a more descriptive and poetic writer. Collaborative writing has improved my confidence and creative writing abilities." (Brannan)

"I feel that my writing has changed in maturity, complexity, and punctuation. The maturity and complexity are similar because I no longer write sentences that are boring and simple. I still have comma issues, but I no longer fear the dreaded complex sentence." (Jackson)

In what ways have your grammatical skills become (better/worse) as a result of collaborative writing?

"When someone else makes a correction of your error, it makes you feel like, "Dang. He just owned me. I'd better not let it happen again." That thinking helped me because I remembered my errors and I try not to make them any more." (Jackson)

I would like to say this about collaborative writing in my sixth grade classroom:

"I think that it is good for students, good for imagination, and whether we were writing about violence, a regular day, or magic, the collaborative experiment was surely a success." (Mitchell)

"Through collaborative writing, I have become an inspired writer. Through this writing and some other things I have learned this year, I have started to write poetry in some of my free time." (Brannan)

"It is a great technique for teaching boys, and I learned a lot. During the river valley project, some boys in my group were putting really descriptive images in, and I really liked them. They make me think that I should start doing that in my writing because it was so good." (Jackson)

"Everyone's writing, including mine, has improved significantly. From listening to the stories we have written and then comparing them to the old stories we used to write, there is a huge difference in how they sound and flow." (Phillip)

"Collaborative writing is a hassle, but it always turns out okay in the long run. With my class, when one of us argues, it's like a domino effect. The worst part about it is that they scream and yell at one another! It's absolutely crazy, but surprisingly, in the end, the people of that arguing group usually compromise and make a very good story." (Mathew)

"If your group cuts you off in the middle of a good idea so someone else can write, the idea in your head could get massacred. Therefore, you may be able to do better on your own." (Aidan)

"When you do collaborative writing, it is on a team level. You have to work together, make sacrifices, and utilize the best ideas in order to create a great story. Collaborative writing is a great way to have fun and to learn a thing or two." (Kevin)

The boys' responses indicated a strong sense that they had enjoyed the collaborative writing process and benefitted from it. This was also my perception as I watched the groups work and listened to them negotiate the collaborative experience. The classroom was charged with energy during the collaborative writing sessions, and the boys smiled, laughed, and were physically active during these sessions. One or two students were hesitant or even angry about writing with a group. The student who felt he was "not fabulously liked" by his classmates had a particularly difficult time learning to compromise in order to get the project done. However, observing him work through this process, I felt that the experience was good even for this student, as he learned some skills of negotiation while navigating through the brainstorming and drafting of a writing piece.

Discussion and Implications of the Study

Although the improvement of boys' social communication skills was not initially a goal or focus of this intervention, one of the most important outcomes of the experiment was the enhancement of the students' ability to communicate with one another and with an adult mentor/coach. In his book *Boys of Few Words* (2006), psychologist Adam Cox examines the problems boys face as a result of their gender-based and culturally-reinforced reluctance to express their opinions, feelings, and thoughts verbally. In this study, Cox observes that boys communicate most in public rather than private situations and that they tend to communicate more in situations that involve conflict rather than those requiring cooperation or empathy. He states, "their brains are magnets for the language of conquest and competition" (p. 48) and draws the following conclusion:

If communication comes easily only when it's time to compete, boys will logically seek out competition to experience the pleasure of self-expression. What of the words that define different kinds of relationships? When will boys develop an ear for the vocabularies of cooperation, conscience, and consideration? The words that make up these vocabularies are the words that will enable our sons to succeed as they mature and become part of new groups at school and work. (p. 49)

During the process of learning to write collaboratively, these sixth-grade students developed a vocabulary of this kind, one that enabled them to work together to produce a shared product valued by the group and, later, by the entire class. In small groups that forced "private" dialogue, the boys learned words and phrases that helped them to fulfill their own goals; i.e., that their own ideas, sentences, and structures be included in the work and that their contributions be valued and praised by their peers.

The first group project was, especially in its initial stages, loud, contentious, and chaotic, though nearly all the boys appeared animated, excited, and engaged. Statements like, "*You're not the boss of this story*," and "*That [idea] sucks*" and "*Just let me do it—you're hopeless*" echoed throughout my large classroom. In other words, the students were locked into competitive diatribe rather than collaborative dialogue. After some individual and group coaching, the boys learned a different "vocabulary" that they could use to accomplish their goals. By the end of the first project, I was hearing more praise and less blame, more compromise and less competition, more kindness and fewer insults. They learned to say something when they felt attacked or injured by the group dynamic so that the other boys could understand their feelings. They learned to give a little and get a little, trading honest praise and constructive criticism to accomplish a common goal. Because during each of the four collaborative projects, the boys wrote with different group partners, they had multiple opportunities to communicate with their classmates in small-group situations that were more private than public. Although several students had difficulty learning these communication skills and practiced them in only a limited way, most gained ease and facility in working with a group and with articulating their ideas, goals, and feelings.

The boys were very proud of the products that resulted from their collaborative work; with good reason, as both their classmates and their teacher evaluated them as effective, enjoyable, fully realized pieces of writing. These results seem to bear out the hypothesis that collaborative writing practice positively impact boys' ability to be powerful writers who are able to fulfill their purposes effectively by using language in a way that impacts their target audience—in this case, both their classmates and their teacher.

Two exciting results of this work that I observed during the boys' work periods were their degree of engagement and the immediacy with which they attacked the writing process. As they worked together on these projects, the majority of them seemed to be experiencing what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (cited in Fletcher, 2006) termed "flow," a term defined by Ralph Fletcher as "a super-rich learning environment where the student becomes totally engaged, so much so that he may lose track of time" (Fletcher, 2006, p. 30). Often, when the period was almost over, the boys were startled that so much time had passed without their noticing it. Far from experiencing the hesitation and procrastination that boys often display when faced with a writing project (Fletcher, 2006), these boys immediately entered the arena of negotiation on the story, essay, or other project and remained engaged and productive throughout. This outcome seems to support the idea that collaborative writing encourages boys to be confident and prolific writers, writers who are able to explain their ideas in written form using abundant detail and fully realized commentary and who are able to approach a writing task without fear, anxiety, or hesitation because they are sure that they have the mental tools necessary to produce an effective writing piece. I also observed that as individual writers, the boys gained noticeable fluency: while doing in-class writing, they were able to write in much more detail, using a number of different organizational, syntactical, and explanatory techniques that they had not possessed at the beginning of the year. They seemed eager to write and did so without protest or any visible signs of anxiety. These characteristics were most visible when the boys took their standardized writing test at the end of the school year. Not only did most fill the pages available for their work, but all the boys also attacked the assignment immediately, worked at it consistently, and seemed pleased and enthusiastic afterward about what they had written. My observation of their behavior during this writing test suggests to me that they definitely had become more "prolific, powerful, and confident" writers.

Implications for Practice

As I complete this report and begin to think about my practice in teaching writing for the next school year and beyond, several ideas suggest themselves. First and foremost, I *will* include collaborative writing assignments in my curriculum next year. However, I will change several things about the way I set up the projects. Before the boys' first experience with collaborative writing, I will set up some ground rules about the way they should offer constructive criticism and the boundaries of mannerly behavior in writing groups. I will encourage honesty but will teach the boys ways of expressing their honest opinions without excluding anyone's ideas or hurting the pride of the person whose ideas are being evaluated by the group. I also plan to include a balance of individual and collaborative writing so that I can continue to analyze the ways in which collaborative writing leads to success for an individual writer. Also, now that I realize how much *time* it takes to write collaboratively, I will be able to plan my lessons more effectively. Lastly, for future classes, I plan to provide them with more outside audiences for their collaborative writing. Sharing their products with other members of the class was great, but I also think they would benefit from having a wider audience and perhaps even submitting some manuscripts for publication.

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Reflection

Writing collaboratively this year has been a rewarding and stimulating experience for both my class and for me. As this project has advanced, many teachers in my school have become interested in it and have tried out some of the strategies and projects invented for the research study. As I have found before with action research, the benefits of the study are not confined to one teacher's classroom. Self-reflective and adventurous experimentation with pedagogical technique benefit everyone in the school.

Designing Effective Writing Prompts for Boys

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Abstract

In this action research project, I began with the question: “What elements of a writing prompt might help boys set out confidently at the beginning of the writing process?” To explore this question, I wrote a series of thirty-five writing prompts that describe topics for an intensive writing course spanning a fifteen-week American semester. The prompts included questions to help students approach a topic and examples from professional writing and past student work to serve as models or solutions to a topic and its challenges. The course and the prompts I designed for it both work from the premise that intensive practice will help boys become powerful and prolific writers. With the prompts, I wanted to help boys in that initial moment of uncertainty that all writers feel when they face a blank page at the beginning of creation. The questions and considerations on the prompt offer an attempt to help them delimit a topic with speed and clarity, and the examples of past writing serve as points of inspiration, giving them confidence as they begin to write. Students in two sections of the class evaluated the prompts in surveys, sharing their thoughts about what which parts of the prompts were most effective in helping them get started and what role the prompt played in helping to initiate an essay. I followed up the surveys by interviewing students about their experience with the prompts.

Introduction

Whenever I watch my students writing essays in one of our class periods, their shoulders hunched, pens scratching a line of text across the pages of their notebooks, I remember a scene in one of the *Wallace and Gromit* cartoons. Chasing a bandit chicken around the living room on a model train, Gromit, the silent but unflappable dog, looks off into the distance and realizes he is about to run out of track. He reaches from the moving train and snatches up a box marked “Spare Track.” Then he rapidly slaps down model train track just before the train rolls over it, each section hitting the floor just before the train could derail. It always seems to me that my students are working with just such a precarious project when they write, laying down the track of their sentences, the ideas and impressions they wish to convey always on the verge of derailing.

Most of us can remember a moment when we could not find the words fast enough in a piece of writing and lost the idea we were trying to express. Writing requires so many tasks: word retrieval, proper syntax, logic – combining them together requires a particular heroism. However, in any writing class I watch, a small handful of boys fidgets or types in a line of text only to delete it and

start with a new line, in startling contrast those working at a furious pace. Instead, this smaller group stares out the window or rapidly writes for a moment and then crosses out whole paragraphs, uncertain about how to approach a topic or just what writing strategy to use.

I had this group in mind when I introduced the prompts at the heart of this study, the writers who have trouble getting started. I set out to write guides that might help boys jump into a piece of writing with a clear sense of purpose or at least with some sense of possibility. My course requires lots of writing, generally three essays a week written outside of class and numerous shorter pieces as part of our daily in-class work. I figured that if I could help my students launch their essays expeditiously, the sheer volume of writing would help them increase in skill and confidence.

The prompts for this course have been for the past decade just short descriptions of topics on a six-week grid aimed at helping boys anticipate the writing deadlines during an academic quarter, one of the four periods of our common grading and assessment calendar. A typical prompt in this pattern might read: "Where do you really live?" Students were free to interpret the prompt in any direction they wished and encouraged to experiment with a wide variety of writing modes: dialogue, narration, description, or exposition.

THE INTERVENTION

As my "action" for this project, I completely redesigned the prompts in the course, replacing the one-sentence statements of general topic with a double-sided sheet of questions, considerations, and writing samples for each assignment aimed at helping students gain confidence and momentum at the start of the writing process. I then surveyed the students twice and repeatedly drew them into short conversations in class about the prompts. I gained the reactions of two sets of students, classes of 14 and 12 students over the course of two semesters. Students were remarkably honest about aspects of the prompts that helped them or in some cases got in the way. Many of their responses helped me understand what helps boys get started with their writing and the critical role that examples and models can play in education.

RESEARCH SURVEY

Very little professional literature directs attention to the use of prompts to encourage boys as they write personal narrative. At present, secondary schools and the universities that research teaching practices within them work with a bias against the use of prompts in writing instruction even though prompts play an increasingly powerful role in such tests as the SAT Writing Sample. The writing workshop and writing process movements (Calkins, 1983, 1991; Graves 1983), both argued that prompts inhibit a young writer's sense of choice. Ask a student to write about a recent vacation, and the prompt may engender the same sentiments the vacation did – boredom or that you are being yanked around on somebody else's trip. Prompts can stall a young writer, particularly a boy who comes to see the prompt as a straitjacket. But little research has been done with the aim of discovering how prompts might be structured to invite boys into the writing process or guide without overwhelming them.

In the past decade, an influential group of writing teachers and journalists (Newkirk, 2001; Fletcher, 2006; Tyre, 2008) has argued that assignments in personal writing are less effective with boys. They urge teachers to devise writing assignments that are more “boy friendly,” focusing less on feelings and more on action, allowing for fantasy and violence. However, Newkirk and Fletcher both based their early research on boys in coed primary schools. In such settings, boys are often using the classroom to act out the ritual of separation from girls that happens in all cultures. In such a research model, it is questionable whether boys show less interest in personal writing through an inherent disposition or for cultural reasons. In other words, did the boys in a coed setting dislike personal writing as a genre or did they believe “personal writing is for girls”? Clearly, we have many examples of men who worked comfortably within the context of the personal essay: Ben Franklin, Mark Twain, E.B. White.

Whatever the case, in my classroom, boys use prompts readily and work on projects of personal writing with an eagerness that astounds me. Fletcher and Newkirk are right to notice that boys love writing that is action-oriented, but personal writing can depict action, risk, and adventure, as it has from Thucydides to Jon Krakauer.

Background of the Study

The School: While Belmont Hill is the newest school in the association of 16 prominent private schools that surround Boston, a group that includes Groton, St. Paul’s, and Roxbury Latin, it has deep roots within the original Puritan culture of Boston, a community distinguished for its belief that literacy is the crucial task of culture, that each man should be able to read his own Bible and write about the state of his spirit and soul. That legacy, with its strong interest in writing, continues in the rich field of schools, colleges, libraries, newspapers, and publishing houses that surround my school.

The Local Writing Culture: Founded by a group of families closely affiliated with Harvard, Belmont Hill grew out of this cultural tradition with a deep respect for writing, the Protestant brand of Christianity that started as Puritanism and evolved to become the modern Unitarian church. Emerson and Thoreau are perhaps the most famous authors who grew out of this tradition of using writing as a means of spiritual reflection and discovery, but the political essayists Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, and the novelists Hawthorne and Melville also owe an enormous debt to this tradition.

As a child, I discovered one of the spiritual journals from this tradition, a kind of diary that focused on the religious faith of the writer, which had fallen between the floorboards in the attic of our farmhouse. As a ten-year-old, I was captivated as I read the words of the farmer who had built our house in the 1830’s, especially his account of the sudden death of his wife and the way it tested his faith. Ever since that encounter, I have believed that writing can help us answer the fundamental questions of our own identity. I want my students to write clearly, but I also want each of my students to be able to write his own *Walden*, his own “*Self Reliance*,” finding a strong sense of identity as they write about the most significant people, events, and places in their lives.

The Course: With approximately 35 essay assignments, a number of in-class writing exercises, two sets of revision assignments, and a final 10-page paper, my writing course operates from the premise that learning to write requires lots of practice. I focused my intervention on the prompts

for the assignments because I know from my own experience that starting out is often the most challenging part of any writing task. I am also aware that my students must write within a limited timeframe. With five subjects to prepare, required sports each day, training in music and other extra-curricular activities, my students often have an hour at most in which to compose a 300–500 word essay for my class. Having taught and coached boys for thirty-five years, I am also aware of a part of their nature that we often overlook when we teach them. Many of my boys want to jump into the middle of writing an essay with the same kind of daring and sense of adventure that they would bring to a cliff dive or a soccer pitch. They do not want an interval of note taking or “brainstorming” – sensible and productive though these might be. They want to launch off the edge of a cliff - or write an essay that stuns their classmates. The prompts attempt to give them a safe place from which to leap.

The Prompts: The prompts for the course focus on a student’s primary experience with the world and grow out of a decade of experimentation and a rich set of conversations with our school’s consulting psychologist, Dr. Michael Thompson, about what might be the most valuable subjects for boys to write about as they develop a sense of identity and core values. While I have tried to keep the prompts from appearing explicitly didactic, my hope is that boys will learn to use writing to explore some of the most basic questions in their experience:

- What are the shaping features in their family of origin?
- Who are the people with whom they have developed affinity, common experience, and important relationships?
- With what parts of the landscape or in what cultural institutions do they feel strong connection?
- In what activities have they witnessed signal moments of their own characters or changes in sensibility? Many of the assignments urge boys to write about the active parts of their lives as this focus often seems to fully engage their attention.
- What losses and joys have shaped their experience?

Basically the prompts try to help boys reflect about their lives through their writing while inviting them to explore a range of writing modes: description, dialogue, narrative, and process writing.

As I redesigned the writing prompts, I kept the image of a pyramid in mind, with the first part of the prompt the basic focal point of a particular topic, and then an increasingly broad base of information to help students start writing:

- Considerations – statements that seek to define or explain a topic for students.
- Questions – queries that seek to prod students as they discover the full range of a topic’s possibilities.
- Well-crafted sentences intended to excite student interest in writing particularly in a certain mode like dialogue.
- Passages from professional writers focusing on the topic of the prompt.
- Past student essays written in response to the same topic.

I realized that some students might be able to start writing immediately with little more than a phrase focusing their attention on a particular topic. But others needed some guiding questions or some examples of writing that illustrated the topic of the prompt. I decided to include with the prompts pieces by professional authors that might inspire students toward excellent work. The last pieces I decided to include were past student essays on the same topic out of an electronic file I have kept of student work over the past decade.

Survey Results

I surveyed the first semester class of students at the $\frac{3}{4}$ point of the course to find out their reactions to the parts of the prompts and the ways in which they either use or don't use the prompt in their writing process. Additionally we had several class discussions on the role of the prompts, and I interviewed six of the students in the first semester course to get more specific responses to questions about the role of the prompts in their writing process. In the second semester, I surveyed the students midway through the course after they had worked with fifteen of the prompts.

In the survey, most of the 26 students wrote that they used a wide range of the information from the prompts throughout their semester's work, with only three students suggesting that they rarely used more than the statement of topic, one writing that he worried that the questions on the prompt would limit his thinking and the topics to which he might respond:

"I generally disregard them and write something as related to the statement describing the topic as I can. I'm not a huge fan of the 'Questions and Considerations.' I think they confuse me more than help me. The prompt should be general enough to relate to a multitude of topics, but the questions generally push in one direction, which limits my train of thought."

A small number of students echoed this wish to move away from the prompt and looked for the maximum circumstance of independence, relying on a sheet of forty alternate topics I have also written.

I've long believed that the topic students choose is not as important as the amount of practice in writing that they get and the number of writing strategies and forms they get the chance to employ. I tell the students at the beginning of the course that if they can't start writing in response to a prompt within five minutes, they should move to the alternate topic sheet. Some students clearly like to wander or write according to a more open agenda; and often in both semesters, these students brought to the class special gifts in terms of creating metaphor, using irony and surprise in their writing strategies, and in the special province of humor. But they represented a distinct minority.

REACTIONS TO THE PROFESSIONAL WRITING

The widest range of opinions in the survey reflected student attitudes toward the examples of professional writing I used on the prompts, drawn from paragraphs or stretches of dialogue that I felt reflected the craft of writing at its best. Most writing texts use such illustrating stretches of text. Here is an example from one of the prompt sheets of such a passage:

My father, born in the gray-and-silver movie tone year of 1938, was part of the generation of Americans who, in their twenties and thirties, approached the concept of intimacy, of authenticity, and open emotion, with a certain tentative abruptness, like people used to automatic transmission learning how to drive a stick shift.

from Manhood for Amateurs by Michael Chabon

This passage appears on a prompt which focuses on writing about a parent, and the instructions that surround it enumerate particular strategies, the use of metaphor or anecdote to help manifest the issues of character that will become the focus of the writing.

In the surveys, students had the most mixed responses to the professional writing, some finding inspiration from the passages while others claimed that they got in the way of their writing process or just seemed too abstract or too perfect to serve as much inspiration.

In the first semester's class, I spent some time introducing the passages of professional writing saying just a few words about the author or the context of the work, often trying to promote further reading from a list of forty nonfiction works I give to the students to promote reading over the school holidays. For example, when I introduced the class to a passage from David Foster Wallace's "*Federer as Religious Experience*," I read the passage aloud, knowing that many of the students might enjoy Wallace's account of himself as passionate fan, dumping his bowl of popcorn in his excitement as he watches Roger Federer's matches with amazement and wonder. Students would read a longer, complex essay by Wallace a week later, and I wanted to get them interested in his prose style. In the survey, a number of students gave enthusiastic responses to the Wallace piece. Out of curiosity, in the second semester, I let the passages from the professional writers stand on their own, hoping to see if they would play a part in the students' writing process without any introduction. In the survey results from the first semester, 11 of the 14 students wrote positively about these professionally written passages, sometimes supplying the names of favorite authors from memory. Three students noted that either they did not read them or didn't find them useful. In the second semester when I let the passages stand largely on their own, the student response was almost opposite, with two students finding them helpful and nine saying they either didn't read them or read them but found them not helpful. Clearly with the work of professional authors, some introduction is necessary, perhaps for no other reason than the instructor's enthusiasm for a piece can serve as a bridge for the students.

Here are some sample comments from the students about the passages from professional writers:

"I occasionally read the professional authors, but only when I am really stuck on a topic and cannot think of anything to write about. I find that while they are good examples of great writing, the passages are cut out of the middle of a paragraph or two, and they do not really give good examples of openings or closings, which I find are the most challenging."

"I always read the sample text. I've really liked Fitzgerald. I love the way he describes events or people without actually using any direct descriptors."

"I do read the professional samples. Some of the ones I've enjoyed include the piece about "*Federer as Religious Experience*," "*Murder by Cricket*," the dialogue from *Knocked Up*, the works of Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and the piece about the father making the food. (from Bill Bryson's *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid*)."

"I usually read the professional authors, but I do not find their work totally useful. I think their writing style is so advanced compared to ours that attempting to use their writing style is nearly impossible."

"Authors, although influential, seem on a level above that is sometimes unachievable. If I read a student who took a witty, unconventional route for a question, it makes me believe more in my own abilities, and what I am capable of even as a student."

"I do not read the samples from professional authors. I believe the samples from former students in the class are much more useful because they were writing to essentially the same topic with the same length goals."

In the last two responses above, even when the question urged students to consider the professional writing on the prompts, they more eagerly wrote about the role that the work of past students played in their writing process.

REACTIONS TO THE ESSAYS OF PAST STUDENTS

On the surveys, all but two students out of 26 responded positively to the student work in a spectrum from suggesting that they enjoyed reading the work to admitting that it had a strong influence on them. One of the two outliers wrote that he just skimmed the work at best, but the other wrote that he purposefully didn't read the work of past students because he worried about the piece influencing his own work:

"I do not really read the student essays because I tried to the first couple of prompts but found it impossible not to lean towards writing on a similar topic, and that blocked my thinking."

But this comment fell far outside the range of the group of responses. The overwhelming majority of students in both semesters wrote about the positive role the work of past students had played in their own writing. While I expected students to enjoy reading the work of past students in the course, I was surprised by the strength of the connection many students felt:

"I find that they are more helpful than the professional authors, because I feel the student essays are more relevant to the topic than some of the professional authors."

"They tend to use language similar to my own. They help me get a better sense of what I should write."

Several students mentioned the way the pieces played a pivotal role either in helping them get started:

"When an idea does not come to right away, I will look at the example essays written by previous students for some inspiration and to see what they wrote about, how either close or far away they drifted from the prompt."

"Reading past students' essays helps me to decide which specific structure to use for my own essay, and sometimes, their essays help me to select a topic for the assignment."

They also mentioned learning valuable lessons about writing:

"I really liked the essay about when a boy's father went skinny-dipping in the pool embarrassing him in front of the other hotel guests, the way he described the events that happened right before, during and after the incident really helped to show the range of emotions he went through, without actually saying 'then, I was really embarrassed' or 'this made me happy'".

I used essays written by a range of students, everyone from past school leaders and star athletes to some of the quietest and most low profile students, boys who may have cut a very narrow social

swath through the school but who were very strong writers. In the first semester, I made a point of introducing the student writer featured on the prompt, reminding my class about their special accomplishments in the school or telling brief anecdotes about them. But in the second semester, as I had done with the passages from professional writers, I largely let the pieces stand on their own.

In the surveys, the students most often responded to the essays written by students they best remembered:

"I find the student pieces fantastic. Not only is it fun to see the essays of the past Belmont Hill legends, but I also think they are useful when thinking about writing your own essay."

The surveys often mentioned essays with a strong action orientation, some element of suspense, or a topic unusually appealing to boys. The most memorable essay in terms of the comments on the survey was a personal account of a first skydive, taken without parental permission and with the instruction of a young instructor who described taking up the sport as a way of overcoming an urge toward suicide. It would have been a compelling essay in anyone's hand, but it helped that the author was a star rower, the lead in the school play, and the winner of the school's prize speaking contest, this essay, the basis of his winning speech. My students could remember the speech and now look back to its origins in this class. Henry had been such a colorful leader and forceful example that I think many of my present students were truly inspired as they looked at the essay and saw its place as a kind of blueprint in Henry's thinking about when to disobey rules and embrace risk. Without much conscious thought or planning on my part, I had created the kind of circumstance that often marks a special strength of boys' schools, the moments when younger boys learn by emulating older boys.

In the same cohort of surveys, students several times responded negatively to an essay that contained much more finely crafted writing. One of the prompts contained an essay written by last year's editor of the newspaper, one of the most talented writers in his class, the essay describing a job running the concession stand at a summer movie theater when the boy was thirteen, working illegally, completely underpaid and doing the most menial labor, popping and serving popcorn. The essay was incandescent in its imagery with a description of movie theater popcorn to make your mouth water, but it didn't resonate with my classes partly I suspect because it described the life they have already lived, menial jobs at the bottom of the work force rather than the exciting subjects in the most popular essays which focused on challenge and adventure. I also suspect that John's general character also shaped their responses to his essay. He'd drifted through senior year as a bit of a joker, a childhood fascination with pirates still catching much of his attention while his classmates were setting their sights on adulthood. Knowing that his parents were initiating a difficult divorce, I understood why John spent the semester writing about the most nostalgic parts of his childhood, and wasn't surprised that his semester's work read a little bit like a journal of one of Peter Pan's Lost Boys. In any case, his lyrical and carefully crafted writing had little impact on the audience of my classes this year.

One of the most popular essays, written by a former captain of the baseball team who took up boxing as a kind of cross-training, described a match in which he was punch drunk after the first round. Most of the essay describes summoning the will to get back up off the stool as the new round begins. His trainer has told him to watch for the tattoo of the Virgin Mary on his opponent's right pectoral muscle. If he sees the tattoo, that will indicate that his opponent is out of position

and vulnerable, ready for striking. The essay ends with the author deciding to get off the stool and head back into the ring, even though he's outmatched in skill and endurance:

"The ref stood in the center of the ring and looked to my corner. I got up. I had to get up. I walked to the center of the ring. Show me the tat. See what happens."

Many students cited this essay as a favorite. It had so much that a boy would love: action and conflict, the need for courage at a particular moment. Some of its excellence I doubt they completely understood, the way it drops readers into the middle of the match rather than starting at some arbitrary beginning, its use of dialogue to convey the temperament of the trainer, and even the use of profanity at one point to show the fatigue and anger of this amateur out of his depth. But one student remembered the piece for more than its impact on his writing:

"My favorite student essay was the one about boxing. I remember the line 'show me the tat; see what happens,' and actually use this line to motivate myself to keep going, either through a tough workout at the gym or through a late night of studying."

As this student reflected on the essay, he showed that he'd learned an even more important lesson about writing – the way that well-crafted language can convey experience from one life to the next in ways that can shape values and ways of looking at the world. As my students read the work of past students in the course, they were seeing models that they could more easily approach and imitate than the work of professionals. They also absorbed the crucial advantage that writing can confer to human life, the ability to record the crucial experiences of our lives, come to a richer understanding of them, and then to communicate them to others.

Conclusions

I shouldn't have been surprised that the past student work should play such a larger role than the work of professional authors in inspiring students as they try to launch as writers. When I taught painting, my sophomores poured over the work of the most talented seniors, giving their work much more attention than the prints from Matisse or Hopper that lined the bulletin boards of the classroom. When I coached sailing in the summer, I watched with fascination when, after a sailor in our club mounted a successful Olympic campaign and silver medaled in Barcelona, two slightly younger boys began campaigns of their own for the next Olympics. The work of the older boy served as a bridge, or a map of what was possible, and that map now included distant ports and the highest levels of competition.

As we help boys chart their courses as young writers, we need to make available to them landmarks and reference points of what is possible, what is attainable as they first set out. While the work of professional authors will serve the most skillful student writers as models of excellence in craft and facility in expression, my students have rightly insisted on the importance of the models of the older boys they emulate, the more concrete examples serving as a starting point as they set off on their own journeys as writers. If a prompt serves as a jumping off place, then the work of past student writers can serve as a mentoring voice, an example to emulate. For a significant number of my writers, the examples of past student work play an important role in helping them find *confidence* as they begin their work and *power* as they compare their own writing with earlier examples of success, both essential elements in helping them become *prolific* writers who can use words to explore the world around them.

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