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Writing learning journeys at KS4

Article from English News 2019 about the working group exploring the writing learning journeys approach with older students

Writing at Key Stage 4: do we *teach*, or do we *do*?

A year ago at our secondary English leaders' network meeting, we posed the question: at Key Stage 4, do we **teach** writing, or do we just **do** writing?

This was a question prompted partly by conversations with teachers across the county working to get to grips with the increased demands of the examinations for the new GCSEs and scrambling to find space for all of the competing demands of the new syllabus in the available time, and partly through reflection on the challenges posed by Daisy Christodoulou in *Making Good Progress?* (Oxford University Press, 2016): *'the best way to develop skills may not always look like the skill itself.'*

In this book, Christodoulou promotes the idea of **deliberate practice** of precisely defined elements of a final task or performance rather than repetition of the final task itself. She draws upon the analogy of baseball used by K. Anders Ericsson of Florida State University in *The role of deliberate practice in the acquisition of expert performance* (The Psychological Review, 1993; 100: p 368):

'Let us briefly illustrate the differences between work and deliberate practice. During a 3-hr baseball game, a batter may get only 5-15 pitches (perhaps one or two relevant to a particular weakness), whereas during optimal practice of the same duration, a batter working with a dedicated pitcher has several hundred batting opportunities, where this weakness can be systematically explored.'

The analogy with baseball players improving their game, not by playing many games but by working on one precise aspect of their game at a time, seemed directly at odds with the experiences of many time-starved English departments, working hard to prepare their students for the GCSE English Language exams by running repeated practice papers.

This appeared to be particularly true of the writing tasks for these papers: as the most familiar task-type in a newly-introduced exam specification, these writing tasks became, in many departments, something of a poor relation. Despite accounting for 50% of the marks for the English Language GCSE, the writing tasks are heavily outnumbered by the less familiar tasks in the reading sections of the exam papers. As teachers used question-level analysis to identify areas of difficulty in the new exams and address the questions where pupils were struggling, the writing tasks were often being given less time in an increasingly tightly-packed curriculum.

In some schools, the main way that writing came into the Key Stage 4 curriculum was as practice of exam-style tasks, with other forms of writing squeezed out by the competing demands of challenging literature and preparation for the reading sections of the English Language papers. By rights, as 50% of one of two GCSEs, writing should account for 25% of the available curriculum time across Years 10 and 11: approximately 70 hours, or roughly 17.5 weeks' worth of lessons, for writing alone. Most teachers of KS4 English give a hollow laugh at the very idea! Few schools have managed to carve out even half that much time for the teaching of writing – this was certainly my own experience of teaching the new GCSE syllabus and struggling to fit everything in.

Through conversations with English teachers and students in Years 10 and 11, I began to try to find out more about how writing was being taught at Key Stage 4. Teachers spoke wryly of their sense that they were not giving enough time to the teaching of writing and most agreed that there was a pragmatic focus on exam-style tasks. Most students, when asked about how they were taught writing, spoke enthusiastically about writing essays around their literature texts; the majority particularly valued their teachers' modelling of how to write analytically. Very few students even mentioned writing for any other purpose unless directly questioned: it simply was not on their radar.

I began to notice in many students' books that the quality and accuracy of their analytical writing far exceeded that of any other writing, suggesting that the privileging of analysis in GCSE lessons meant that students valued it more highly, worked at it more consistently and had higher expectations of their own work in these tasks – likely in response to the modelling and sharing of examples of excellence by their teachers.

Of course, all schools are different and even within departments in the same school, there are differences of approach between teachers. However, the knowledge of the pressures on English teachers to find time for a huge range of learning at GCSE, together with the growing pattern apparent in pupil and teacher responses to questions about writing, made it seem that the question of whether we **teach** or whether we **do** writing at KS4 was an important one for all of us to consider.

The KS4 Writing Groups

When we posed this question at our meeting, we also proposed a working group to explore approaches to teaching writing at KS4. Heads of English nominated experienced and talented teachers from their schools to take part in the project, which has run across the autumn and spring terms of the current academic year with teachers from Aldworth School, Brookfield Community School, Cams Hill School, Cove School, Hounslow School, Testbourne School, The Hamble School, The Hurst Community College, The Vyne School, The Wavell School and The Westgate School. We worked in two groups, covering roughly the north and the south of the county, exploring planning together and experimenting with approaches back in each school.

We agreed that the reality of the GCSE curriculum meant that we had to make our planning for teaching writing integrate with the other texts being taught, and that each writing unit should be compact. However, each teacher agreed that they would find a way to make time and space for writing. Returning to the idea of deliberate practice, we explored how we could manage this when, in fact, by GCSE one of the key things that is expected of students is that they are able to apply a huge range of prior learning to their writing and to shape it to the demands of a task with minimal stimulus to go on. What, then, should we ask students to deliberately practise? More than this, we wanted to **teach** writing, not just to practise it – but what to teach?

Taking inspiration from some elements of the HIAS three-phase learning journey model which we know to be a successful way of planning, we began to shape our approach for KS4. We decided to use the GCSE Literature texts as a jumping off point because this appeared to be the most effective way of integrating our writing planning into the overall curriculum, which is usually constructed around the English Literature syllabus. However, not all of the schools participating in the project study the same texts and therefore we needed to find a flexible way of working. We

The *capture, sift and sort* phase of these learning journeys is crucial in bridging the gap between thematic exploration of literary texts and precise teaching of elements of writing that will move pupils forward. We agreed two principles: you stand or fall on the quality of your WAGOLL (*What A Good One Looks Like* – an extract from a quality text that offers a model of the writing we want to see), and you work to make students better writers, one trick at a time. We worked hard to choose WAGOLLS that were engaging and of high literary quality in their own right, and that exemplified the features of writing that we wanted to see in students' work. For our night time unit, we used the opening chapter of Erin Morganstern's *The Night Circus* as a WAGOLL because it uses the motif of the gathering darkness and the shifting boundaries of night and day so clearly to structure and shape the text; we wanted students to write a piece using this technique to craft their own writing and to manipulate the reader's responses. During the *capture, sift and sort* phase, we explored the ways that Morganstern had done this and deliberately practised creating and sequencing references to light and darkness to link events and ideas effectively. We also explored and imitated the way Morganstern repeatedly integrated extra descriptive detail in sentences with additional embedded clauses, which students practised deliberately in their own sentences. Moving from analysis into creation, identifying, exploring and then imitating a writer's key methods meant that students were able to see the mechanics (or *stylistics*) of a text and then recreate them, leading to much more conscious crafting of their own writing. During practice tasks, it is easy for teachers to assess quickly whether students have grasped key concepts and address misconceptions and errors or infelicities before students move on to writing their final piece.

'What I have found is that it is accessible – I teach mixed ability and students across the attainment range have accessed the strategies and features that we have focused on.' **Jess Cheung, The Hamble School**

In the final *create, refine, evaluate* phase of the night time learning journey, we focused on applying the strategies for planning practised in the previous phase, linking the use of references to light and dark, day and night, to the intended impact on the reader. Students also applied the sentence structures they had practised in the *capture, sift and sort* phase in their own writing. Teachers could decide whether to design a final written task that was rooted within the world of the literary text used as a stimulus, or to give pupils greater freedom to explore ideas and themes from the text in their own way. Some teachers decided instead to use a picture stimulus for the final piece of writing.

'My pupils are now writing so much better as a result of this! We now have a portfolio of outstanding writing in each classroom and can show the raised standards for pupils to look at, which is inspiring for other pupils.' **Lesley Lawson, Cove School**

We placed great importance on choosing a feature that we wanted to teach that was, in fact, an interesting and notable feature of the text we were using as a model – this sometimes meant that we had to reshape our thinking, or choose a different text to use as a WAGOLL. Sometimes we used two texts from which to cherry-pick interesting features. It was interesting to notice how often the feature that cried out for imitation was a structural feature – we looked at split perspectives in *Jaws*, at the shaping and sequencing of paragraphs in an extract from Patrick

Ness, the use of extended metaphor to link and shape ideas in Caitlin Moran’s *How to Be a Woman* and the use of word-level sentence cohesion in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *We Should All Be Feminists*. So often, we found, it was this conscious crafting of structure and cohesion that made the difference in the quality of the students writing. A knock-on effect of this focus on structural features in the students writing has been a marked improvement in the students’ understanding of structure in other texts and therefore in their analytical responses.

‘The biggest thing for me has been the improvement of the analysis of structure by understanding through writing it – that has been revolutionary for my students.’ **Liz Faulkner, Testbourne School**

In our final group meetings we explored what we had learned through the project, and for many of the teachers, it had been that the students had not only made significant gains in their writing, but had also made equivalent gains in their reading and analysis because they had understood the relationship between intention, technique and effect so much more thoroughly by exploring it practically through their own writing. While every learning journey we planned took longer than we had intended – which is something to consider, bearing in mind the context of the time-pressured GCSE course – the gains made by pupils in a more holistic way meant that less time needed to be spent on exam preparation.

‘The students have been really engaged – we have finally found an engaging way of teaching the exam skills, rather than ploughing through the exam papers. They don’t even realise that they have been studying for the exam.’ **Caroline Waters, The Wavell School**

‘This is not just about a writing journey for the students, this is a journey of discovery for practitioners. I have adapted the way that I approach the art of writing with more awareness. In particular, I now teach structure with more confidence and I have seen a marked improvement with cohesion in writing.’

It is remarkable what skills can be honed with one compelling model of writing and a thematic approach.

It has been rewarding to watch students spend time crafting their writing with a real understanding of a writer’s intention.’ **Debra Obray, Brookfield School**

For me, working with these two groups of passionate teachers has been inspiring, as has seeing the fantastic progress in writing made by their students. Members of the group will be presenting their work in a workshop at the Leading Improvement in English summer conference on 25 June.

All of the planning and resources for the learning journeys developed through the KS4 Writing Group will be published via Moodle+, with the *Night Time* journey available to explore on the Open Resources area of the English Moodle.

HIAS English Team

The HIAS English team offer a wide range of high-quality services to support schools in improving outcomes for learners, including courses, bespoke consultancy and inhouse training.

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