



Writing and the importance of context

One of the best things about attending conferences and workshops is the exposure to ideas, some of the best of which are simple, coherent and easily adaptable, so that you wonder why you didn't think of it yourself. This resource will share one of these ideas.

At the PETAA *Professional Learning Intensive* 2018 on 19 and 20 October, we were immersed in ideas around writing, including examples of how some schools are teaching writing in dramatically interesting ways.

There are writers who produce books – they make their living from writing books for children and other people to read. It was this context of writing for authentic purposes that provided the structure for the writing that was showcased in this weekend of professional learning.

Authors in schools

One of PETAA's innovations in 2018 has been the **Authors in schools** project, a collaboration with the [Copyright Agency](#). The project connected authors and illustrators with students and teachers, who worked together in primary schools all over Australia.

Several of these collaborations were presented to the *Professional Learning Intensive*. Authors spoke about their input and interest in working with students, and the teachers described how the projects came to fruition.

Wow! The results were amazing. Students were focused, intent on getting the meaning across, engaged with and enjoying the whole writing process in these projects.

The usual and the familiar

But it is so easy to get locked into the usual and the familiar in our everyday teaching. We seem to have the same types of topics and processes repeated, as we grapple with the conflicting demands of our work with writing.

Sometimes we forget that writing is about shifting the reader's thinking, about challenging them, about telling stories. We may have frequent writing opportunities in class, but these can easily get stuck into the '*what I did on the weekend*' format, or '*why we should/n't wear school uniform/have junk food in the canteen/get rid of plastic bags*'. Such topics bore both teachers and students, and are frequently irrelevant to the child's real world, the one which is happening inside their heads. The '*what I did on the weekend*' topic is almost spying. It is how we find out that mummy and daddy stayed in bed all morning, or that the household went to a fast food outlet every night, or that grandma has just died.

Or not.

Kids make stuff up.

That's what writing can be - the opportunity for kids to make stuff up, to stretch the truth, to create fantasy worlds based on, but very different from, the one they have to work through and tolerate every day.

An easy idea

Sue Whiting, author of *Platypus and Missing*, spoke to us of her work with several schools as part of the **Authors in schools** project, and gave us an insight into working with different grades. Sue is obviously energized by writing with teachers and students.

One clear message Sue gave us was that our kids need to know that they can take their own reality and twist it and stretch it to do whatever they want – because THEY are in charge.

This, of course, is what writing is all about.

Sue asked us to identify truths, facts about ourselves. Then she asked us to stretch one of these. Then we were given permission to turn that one stretched truth into the biggest lie we could make up.

Discussing this process as we worked through the activity was fun and informative. What it did was to shift the focus of the sentences we were writing, from straight description into endless possibilities, while retaining the elements of truth and believability. In this way we could see how each word has the power to alter meaning, to build understanding. And to make writing an exciting exploration.

Check out Sue's website <https://suewhiting.com/>

NSW Syllabus links (my emphases)

ENe–2A: Students:

- drawing on their experience of language and texts, begin to understand that writing and representing can be used to convey an idea or message
- share writing with others for enjoyment

EN1–2A: Students:

- experiment in all aspects of composing to enhance learning and enjoyment

EN2–2A: Students:

- experiment and share aspects of composing that enhance learning and enjoyment

EN3–2A: Students:

- understand and appreciate the way texts are shaped through exploring a range of language forms and features and ideas
- experiment and use aspects of composing that enhance learning and enjoyment

At no time is writing expected to be drudgery. The dry descriptions in the Stage Statements are not a guide for enjoyment. Here's an excerpt from Stage 2

They use simple and complex sentences, paragraphing, punctuation and grammatical features characteristic of the various texts to support meaning. Students spell familiar and unfamiliar words using knowledge of letter-sound correspondence, regular and irregular spelling patterns, spelling rules and a range of other strategies.

NSW English Syllabus K-10 p.19

This description has its own purpose. Entertainment, 'enjoyment', is not one of them. Yet enjoyment is there, repeated in the content. That's what we need to focus on in our teaching.

Interesting items

- For your interest, PETAA is hoping to run the **Authors in schools** project again in 2019. Check the PETAA webpage under Resources for updates and further information.
- When you go into [Copyright Agency](#), which is an initiative of [Reading Australia](#), take the time to have a look at the **New Teacher Fellowship** that was announced in July 2018. This is the first-ever Reading Australia Fellowship for Teachers of English and Literacy, and is worth \$15,000. The chosen Fellow will receive a \$15,000 grant to undertake professional development and research to enhance their careers.

Applications are open now and will close on March 1, 2019. This for teachers of English and literacy who hold a senior teaching position, have a minimum of five years' teaching experience and are Australian citizens or permanent residents.

This is an important way for us to be able to demonstrate to those critics out there that we really are serious about our work.

Go for it!

References

NSW Board of Studies (2012) English Syllabus for the Australian curriculum Sydney. Retrieved from <https://syllabus.nesa.nsw.edu.au/download>