

Choices and voices: Students take control of their writing

Kerry Fernandez and Judie Mitchell

CONTEXT

This story has a number of characters. The characters in this multi-vocal text are the 25 students of 7B; the English teacher/observer, Kerry Fernandez; and Judie Mitchell, a colleague and observer. It is the combination of the voices that produces the narrative and the story is incomplete and inconclusive if any one voice is dominant or omitted. We have chosen to tell this story as a narrative, in our own voices. A complexity of perspectives is evident in the different individual experiences of the 25 students of 7B (Year 7 being the first year of high school). These students had been together as a class for approximately six months when this series of writing lessons began. They came from various primary schools, both government and Catholic, within the local area.

We collected data in a variety of ways: student surveys, student texts, audio taped interviews and the field notes made by Judie as she viewed and interacted with the students. There were also observations and notes made by myself as 7B's English teacher. Our data were

collected over a semester. A video was also made of a discussion session conducted twelve months after our data collection began. This discussion lesson involved inviting the students to articulate how much they remembered about the writing processes that they had been involved in twelve months previously, and their feelings about that experience.

KERRY

I believe that writing is a form of communication that is complex and requires the formulation of ideas and the sharing of meaning. Within a school setting, however, writing is often performed as an isolated act. Students are provided with a topic or choose a topic, and mostly have to write on their own. Treating writing as an isolating task, detached from a social process, fundamentally alters the nature of writing as a communicative act.

I had become intrigued by the theoretical concept of metacognition. White (1988) theorised memory as having seven elements. There are two elements of this model that are pertinent to this story—an *episode* (a memory of an event one took part in or witnessed) and *cognitive strategies* (general skills involved in controlling thinking). One of my guiding themes was to alter students' perceptions of school writing by creating a positive episode, or succession of episodes. The proposition I began with was: could an atmosphere be created that would encourage students to be enjoyably involved in the construction of their own texts? I wondered if I could create an episode which the students would not only remember, but which would alter their negative attitudes to school writing. In terms of cognitive strategies, I wanted students to become more aware of the processes involved in the construction of their own writing. If they possessed an explicit understanding of these processes, they would be in a position to have greater control over the construction of their own texts. I was also inviting them to be more in control of their own thinking.

The story has its origins in the impromptu—not the unplanned, but the unexpected. As 7B's English teacher, I had arranged with Judie that she would observe a lesson in which we would find out

more about 'how students feel about writing'. However, I had forgotten this arrangement until I sighted Judie heading towards 7B's classroom. The lesson for the day was shelved and hastily a forum for discussion took its place. The statement 'thrown' at the students was: 'Put your hand up if you like writing.' When I was bombarded with an overwhelmingly negative rejoinder, I realised I was going to have to be adaptable.

In that first impromptu lesson, there were only four students who claimed to like writing. Their reasons were:

I like writing when I can think of something good for a story.

When something bad happens to me I like to write about it happening to someone else.

I used to have good ideas but now I don't. I think it's because I don't read as much as I used to.

I find writing easy. I can always come up with some ideas. I enjoy writing.

When the statement was reversed, however, a cacophony of voices rose round the classroom. For several minutes, the students were given the unfettered freedom to express their dissatisfaction with writing. The most common cry was that writing was BORING! They were asked to elaborate on this explanation:

Last year in Grade 6 we had to do an hour and a half every day and we got sick of it.

I can never think of the next sentence.

It's not fun and we could be doing other things.

If I need help, I have to wait for the teacher. I had to keep my hand up and my arm got sore.

I would do a movie or a play.

In Grade 3 we had to do an hour and a half of writing each day.

We were not allowed to use the names of the people in the grade, which spoiled the story because it was more interesting to include real people in the story.

We weren't allowed to write mean things about a real person without asking their permission and they always said 'no'.

It's better if we could write at home.

The pen runs out. It's also waste of paper when you have to do drafts.

Evan stated in all seriousness that he just didn't have any imagination. Katherine's comment is particularly pertinent: 'Maybe stories are boring because the writer wants them to be boring.' Another way of construing this comment is to rephrase it. When there is little or no incentive to write, is there a lack of intrinsic motivation? As such, does the act of writing become boring?

Judie and I recorded the students' concerns and then threw the discussion back to them. What would make writing more enjoyable? They talked amongst themselves and then wrote down their comments and shared them with great enthusiasm. It is important to display the wide range of their recommendations:

Make it more interesting by not including any boring or slow parts if it's supposed to be an adventure story. Otherwise the reader thinks it's going to be like that for the whole story.

Put more problems in it, more adventure, more mystery, make it funny. Make bad things happen if you are angry.

More action, more Spice Girls, less drafts.

Write stories in a group. Do just one copy. It helps knowing it will get somewhere. Make it into a play, a film or a book.

Include whoever you want. Write in your own time span.

Include real people. Make it something that you would want to read.

No romance or love bits.

Choose what kind of story we wanted to write. Talk about it instead of just writing about it. Choose which people we want to be in it. Write in a group.

Write a story based on your own hobbies.

Tell people what to write instead of having to write it yourself. Not so many drafts. You forget what you are about to write if you have a long sentence to write. Tape it so that we could look at it. Use other people's names.

Write about people in your grade or school. Write about famous people.

Write any words or things you want. Write a story with your friends so that it has different ideas in it.

Write about any subject you want and you could swear in it to express your feelings.

Only write for half an hour at a time.

Not so many rough copies. Choose what kind of story we want to write.

Make it into a video, a play or a book. Talk about it instead of writing about it.

The students of 7B certainly had their own definite views on the way in which the construction of their own texts should take place.

JUDIE

I saw three main areas of student complaint. The first was the individualistic nature of the writing they had to do. Secondly, they felt they had to write too much and too often. Thirdly, they wanted more control over their texts—what form they would take, the language they used and who and what could be included.

There was a clear plea from the students to let them write together in a social situation. One of the main concerns for students is that they are generally expected to write in isolation. During a later data collection session, Cara said about most of her school writing: 'The silence deafens you.' (June 1999)

Crowley points out the social nature of language:

The solitude that often accompanies the act of writing seduces writers into believing they are engaged in individual acts of creation; it is all too easy to forget, while writing, that one's language belongs to a community of speakers and writers, that one has begun writing in order to reach (absent) readers, and that one's 'innovative ideas' have long textual histories behind them, histories which contain many voices (Crowley, 1989, p. 35).

Language is communication, and expecting students to write what is ostensibly a piece of communication without discussing it seems unnatural and cruel to them. They believe they cannot get good ideas unless they talk together.

KERRY

Through listening to the voices of these young writers, I was provided with a different perspective by which to plan future lessons. I developed a unit of loosely constructed lesson plans that incorporated the

students' ideas. I was prepared to take the risk of following the direction of the students. This proved to be a decisive turning point in my own appreciation of the way in which texts are constructed.

In the next lesson, I put forward a scheme that would meet the needs of the students and asked for their feedback. I explained to the class about the boundaries within which I, as their English teacher, had to operate—such as curriculum and appropriate language. The only boundaries that were fixed were those of genre and censorship of language. Prior to the commencement of these writing sessions, 7B had studied the genre of adventure through the film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. Thus they were required to display their understanding of the aspects of this genre in their own writing.

Apart from these two restrictions, the students had total control over what kinds of texts they wrote and how they wrote them. Predictably, all but one of them chose to work in groups, ranging in size from two to eight. The formation of their writing groups was very much along lines of gender and level of social development. The largest writing collective was a 'socially aware' group whose play was set very much in the modern era. This collective consisted of Sam, Claire, Steven, Sharyn, Mark, Marie, David and Ewan. Another large group was made up of girls: Shae, Kate, Bree, Yvonne, Belinda, Kirsty and Kathy. The way in which they adapted the genre of adventure was to align it to fantasy. Correspondingly there was an all-boys group: Adam, Tony, Kevin, Bobby and Erik. They chose the Western adventure. They also co-opted the services of a girl to play the supplicant female who could be 'saved'. Sean chose to write an adventure story by himself. David K. and Alan elected to present their story in cartoon form. Mark L. and Darrell wrote an adventure story set in the future.

Having selected their own groupings, the following lessons were highly productive. They wrote practically nothing! However, what was achieved was a total immersion in communication. Essentially what they were being asked to do was to solve a problem. The problem was to construct an adventure text. They used problem-solving communicative techniques to achieve this end. Garton and Pratt point out that: 'In social interaction, children learn to use the tools that will enable them to achieve the ends or goals they require.' (Garton and Pratt, 1989, p. 41). Prior to writing, they discussed, they

play-acted, they debated and argued, until a resolution was achieved by the group.

A theoretical perspective that is applicable to the way in which these young people were seen to interact is Vygotsky's (1986) social interactionist theory. This theory pertains to the way in which individuals relate mutually to produce an effective communication, by voice, gesture and facial expression. This theory has its basis in human social development. As individuals interact, social practices are learned, communication is shared and meaning is developed. When the students of 7B chose their groups for this series of writing sessions, they formed into social groups which suited their various stages of social development. There was already the basis of social interaction present.

The writing sessions took place during one period per week over the second semester and culminated in the videotaping of the performance pieces, the reading of the stories and the displaying of the cartoons. This time frame allowed other areas of the English curriculum to be addressed.

The writing sessions were a period of time to be looked forward to. While I was preoccupied with overseeing the class, Judie observed and took field notes. She not only recorded observations of student interaction but also spoke with them, gaining their opinions of how they were viewing the writing lessons.

JUDIE

The task overcame all three of the students' objections to writing. They worked in social groups as a community of speakers and writers, sharing their voices and ideas. The resulting student texts were rich and vibrant—illustrating vividly the extensive textual histories these students already possessed, at the ages of 12 and 13. Their texts were full of, but not derivative of, the adventure films they had seen, the TV shows they had watched and the video games they played.

Working in groups also reduced the amount of actual writing they each had to do. The drafting process took care of itself in the conversation (and also in the acting out and the amassing of props and

costumes). Their arms and hands did not get sore!

The choice of plays by so many groups may have helped them meet their need to use their peers as models for characters. Teachers know the ways in which children can deliberately hurt each other in their writing. As Gee (1996) says, words can be 'loaded weapons'. However, most authors use their real-life friends and relations in some way in creating their characters in novels and plays. Creating a character based on a person who is then acted by another person puts a distance between the words and the person who was the original inspiration.

Having control over the form of text, the language and the content allowed them much more creativity. They were (surprisingly) purposeful and deliberate about the choices they made about what sort of language to include, and how they would use their peers as models for characters. I observed in my field notes:

Groups are all working and so ON TASK! When I came over to the girls' group they were sitting around writing the script (for their fantasy adventure play). After about fifteen minutes they were up and acting it out. It seemed such a spontaneous move to do this.

The boys' group (Western adventure play) has a huge bag of props: guns, hats, etc. They enter into negotiation with Kerry about using caps [blanks] (in the guns).

It surprised me that, given the opportunity, the majority of students began immediately to think of their writing in terms of much more than simply words on a page. Allowed to work with their friends and to write drama, they launched themselves into writing that was more in line with Gee's idea of 'Discourse' than the usual 'discourse' of school writing:

I will use the word discourse for connected stretches of language that make sense, like conversations, stories, reports, arguments, essays and so forth. So 'discourse' is part of 'Discourse'.

Discourses are ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs and social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions and clothes. A discourse is a sort of social identity kit which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize (Gee, 1996, p. 127).

One girl wanted to build a wedding into the group's story because she had a wedding dress at home she wanted to wear. Another student said:

it was fun watching everyone . . . trying to be their characters, like some people didn't fit their character but they are now.

The all-girls group wrote a play they called 'Old':

Our play is quite old and all that, and we had to get the names that matched the oldness of it, like Maudula. Shae made us write old English things like, instead of saying thank you, she's got to say much obliged.

They chose not to use swear words because the language (swearing) was not the 'proper form'.

The all-boys group found that collecting props helped them visualise and conceptualise the kind of story they would write. The boys who did the cartoon could express their ideas visually, with a minimum of text.

The idea of discourse and Discourse also played out in the groups they chose. The mixed-gender group considered themselves socially superior to the other students and membership of this group was strictly controlled. They said they enjoyed working as a group because they could choose their friends and were 'not hanging around with the geeks'. The shy boys chose to work in pairs, and the other two groups were single-sex groups.

KERRY

An interesting feature of the writing lessons was that the students began to see me not as their English teacher, not as the person who gave specific directives but as someone whom they could use as a reference point. When they were satisfied with a particular section of their text, they would excitedly ask me to view it or read it. Their self/group editing had eliminated many of the structural errors that so often plague student writing—spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, etc.

What I observed was groups of young people using speech and other ways of communicating to organise their collective ideas. In their groups, they were transferring their ideas into written language in a very personally meaningful way.

WAS AN EPISODE CREATED? DID IT CHANGE THEIR VIEWS?

Kerry and Judie

Twelve months after this writing episode, members of the class were invited to discuss what they remembered of it. The class discussion was videotaped. The data collected indicated that an episode was created, but it did not change their views about writing. It appeared to us that one episode, albeit a long one, was not enough to impact on these students' memories of years of boring school writing tasks.

They remembered vividly many aspects of the writing episode. The context of the discussion was interesting too—when Kerry asked them to move into the groups they had been in for the writing, they did so immediately and animatedly, even though there had been a number of changes in the class; some students were no longer present, and some had not been there in 1998.

They remembered that being able to 'use language' (by which they meant negotiated swear words) made their writing 'more fun', 'more real'. When asked what lines they remembered, each group could remember easily some significant lines. It may be true that, being

mostly plays, the lines stuck, but the groups who wrote the cartoon and the story also remembered lines. These lines show the quality of the writing, and their understanding of the rules of the adventure genre. The story group remembered their opening lines, a conversation:

I've done it! I've done it!

You've done what?

I've created a time machine!

The boys who did the cartoon remembered one of their speech bubbles:

I've got some special powers.

The boys with the guns remembered the action scene in the bar:

You're gonna die Jake, you're gonna die!

I don't think so!

Members of the socially advanced group proudly quoted two lines which they clearly treasured, from the expression they managed to instil into them. And of course it is difficult to convey this expression in writing—a point which seems to underlie much of this paper's argument. They also insisted on putting the lines into the context:

You are an unimaginable bastard.

When Ewan asked me for a kiss, I said, 'If I was a fly I wouldn't land in your shit any day!'

They loved being able to work in groups and to move around: 'We didn't have to sit at a table all day'. They loved having choices, not having to do individual drafts, and that they got to talk to their friends and didn't have to be quiet. They appreciated working in friendship

groups because 'we knew what each other was like'. One student stated that it was the 'first *real* story that we've been writing'. They remembered who had what parts in the plays, being able to play with their props, act out their roles, and 'use our voices'.

One group, however, had more negative memories. For them the episode made them 'hate writing even more, 'cos we couldn't agree on some things'. They commented that they:

would only add two lines and she'd take it home and write six pages, and we'd have to agree to it otherwise she'd threaten to pull out of the group.

Kerry observed that the girl in question (who had now left the school so was not present during this lesson) was a gifted writer. However, her peers were not impressed with the final results—they said the story was too slow, and not interesting enough. They also described the girl in an interview as being 'a control freak'.

The mixed-sex group also had disagreements over the content of their play. In the interview this exchange took place:

The girls wanted one thing and the boys wanted another.

The boys wanted to, like, have all fighting and that.

Yeah, they wanted to be heroes and be fantastic and us girls wanted to . . .

Yeah, but they wanted to get married . . .

And have a crash in a limousine . . .

We asked them then whether they had changed their ideas about writing. Their comments were a depressing repetition of the comments from twelve months earlier. In trying to probe why this might be, it seemed that they regarded this episode as too different from their usual school writing.

It wasn't just like writing, it was drama too.

It was a different sort of writing—that's why it was fun.

Their comments are a major concern to us as English teachers. They commented on the amount of theory they had to write in other subjects (copying from the board or from books), the emphasis on spelling, the isolation of it all ('we don't do group work', 'we have to think of all the ideas ourselves', 'our friends can't help us'), the uncomfortable seats, the tired arms and hands from so many drafts.

Judie

Much of the individualisation of writing in schools is driven by assessment—as teachers, we don't always want the hassles of dealing with group problems and ascertaining which student has contributed what to a group project. The outcomes-driven nature of the state's [Victoria's] curriculum documents force us into these positions as well—we are forced into reporting on whether Cindy in Year 8 can individually measure up to a certain standard. We are forced to put into the background other important skills that Cindy may have, such as being willing to collaborate and share ideas with her peers, and mentoring a less able friend in the art of spelling. In the final two years of secondary schooling, we are constrained by the apparent necessity of 'authentication'—the need to be 'certain' it is the student's own work. We need to interrogate more critically our objections to group work, and collaborative writing. Crowley (1989) presents us with:

the notion recently advanced by some composition theorists that all writing is collaborative. Research into the production of writing in the marketplace has established that most of this sort of writing is the product of many hands (1989, p. 37).

Not only is much writing beyond school collaborative, but it also has a defined purpose, a target audience and results in terms of clear (good

or bad) consequences. When we interrogate most school writing using these criteria, it is easy to see why many students find school writing meaningless and boring.

The episode Kerry provided for the students of 7B involved considerable risks. It would have been much easier for her and her mental health to have forced the students to write individual stories seated at their desks in silence. They would have hated it but they would have done it (without much of a murmur, because they are rarely asked for their opinions). Instead, Kerry found herself with a bunch of noisy, active Year 7 students, who repeatedly tested the boundaries of what was and was not 'allowed'. She needed to be flexible in her timing; she could not put arbitrary time frames on this task—as she says, it was a problem-solving exercise and any artificial time frame would destroy the 'scientific method'. This meant other aspects of the curriculum had to be ignored or put aside. The fact that they chose to write plays meant organising and stage managing a dramatic space and a major performance.

The students appreciated Kerry's efforts. They noted that:

You learn more if there is not so many boundaries. If you've got so many boundaries, like you can't do this and you can't do that, then you can't experience more things so you don't learn more things.

When you're acting it out, I think it is better than writing, because then you know if something is wrong, and it doesn't fit in, like in the hill part . . .

Kerry

In this research, I radically changed my approach to teaching writing. I handed over almost complete control to the students (Year 7) over what and how they would write. Through my observations of students constructing their own texts and by listening to the voices of the students, my own preconceived notions of writing were challenged. Over a period of time, I began to see myself, during these writing

sessions, not as the 'teacher' but more as the resource person whom students could access when the need arose. The students became more reliant upon themselves and their peers in terms of solving their writing problems.

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3

What is it about homework?

Deborah Tranter

What grade did you get for the project?
I got an 'A', which was better than last time.
Oh! I only got a B+.

Surprisingly, this was not two students talking, but their parents. It was part of a conversation overheard at a local football training session. The conversation was between the parents of two Grade 5 students. They were discussing their children's homework.

INTRODUCTION

In my experience as a teacher, conversations like the one quoted above are not unusual. Reflecting on conversations of this nature has, over the years, led me to question the purpose and value of homework as a means of improving children's learning. How equitable is homework when teachers have little influence over the home learning environment; lack an understanding of the home conditions