

four seasons in one day –

literacies in changing climates

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Learning to write: skills, meanings and the uses of literacy

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Three qualities I'd like to see teachers free to invoke;
Mystery: letting a story come to you out of the shadows without ...jabbing questions at it like sticks
Chance: the sort of rich environment, full of curious objects and true stories, and the teachers' own experience, which result in the unpredictable catching-fire which is the most memorable thing we get from education
And Silence: the freedom to read like a butterfly, write like a bee: wandering and following your interests and then turning all you've gathered into honey.

***Philip Pulman
(writing of the National Curriculum in England) ¹***

All I have to say is that nobody would believe that there are 56 million people in Britain, we see and hear from so few of them

Raymond Williams (1968) ²

"You've got to start small before you can go big on the writing. You've got to sort the basics out. Write a basic letter... then you can put more and more into it... I started like that... but now I'm starting to get into the descriptive side. You can start putting more into your writing. " Learners, Newcastle

"Poetry: I would really love to do this".

Learners talking to NRDC researchers ³

Learning and using writing in 19th Century and 21st Century England: how much has changed?

Introduction

Writing, more than reading, motivates adults to learn. So says much evidence. This is true of the past, as well as the present, and particularly in informal learning situations. If we listened more to learners in the present era, we would uncover a finer-grained picture of the relationship of learners to their writing development. From the perspective of governments and more powerful groups in a socially stratified or divided society, reading has been and remains the key literacy: dominant in learning provision; dominant in literacy research; more discussed, debated and assessed than writing. 'Writing' it has been argued "has been a virtually invisible topic in the material history of modern culture" ⁴. Why is this?

I will explore some issues in writing in adult literacy learning, drawing on my own doctoral research into practices and politics in 19th century England. I will also draw on research which is currently being undertaken in the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC). This is an organisation led by the Institute of Education, University of London. The NRDC has been established to provide evidence to develop literacy, numeracy and ESOL policy and practice - and to support teacher education and professional development for everyone working in the field. Our research on writing looks at 'Effective Practice in the Teaching and Learning of Writing'. This is a large study, sister to four other linked studies: of reading, numeracy, ESOL and ICT. These are all studies which seek to correlate the progress and achievement of learners with the teaching approaches they experience. Observations of practice in classrooms and other settings are carried out, using a detailed log. There are also 'before' 'during' and 'after' assessments of the progress learners have made using new instruments developed specifically for these studies, but drawing on a major 'what works' study on ESL literacy in the USA (studies led by Larry Condelli of the title) Other linked NRDC studies are exploring what motivates learners, what makes teaching and learning meaningful to them, and what impact is the '**Skills for Life**' learning infrastructure' developed in England since 2001, having on adults engaged in learning. The NRDC writing study is led by Sue Grief and colleagues at the Learning and Skills Development Agency, one of NRDC 's partner organisations.

Learning from the past

Why is the 19th Century so important for understanding literacy, and the learning of writing in particular. Raymond Williams argued that the first half of the 19th century was the moment of change following two thousand years when writing was known only to a minority. By the 1840s, a majority of people rapidly achieved at least 'minimal access' to writing. The measure of their literacy was writing rather than reading: a signature rather than an 'x' on the marriage register. But the use of writing, in contrast to access to texts for reading, remained contested throughout that period. Writing was seen to be a worldly, temporal activity for those whose only time to learn was on a Sunday. Writing was associated with inappropriate aspirations among working class people, encouraging upward mobility and at worst, offered people the tools to engage in forgery, one of the gravest criminal offences. By the second half of the century, literacy skills could be rewarded by the increasing availability of clerical jobs and upward mobility tapped away at the firm walls of a society rigidly divided by social class. The Penny Post had been introduced in 1840. Church and State were active, even obsessed by education for the 'lower classes'. An inspectorate was established in 1839 to inspect the many local, community-run schools, such as 'Dame Schools', which provided reading, writing,

arithmetic and practical subjects. The inspectors chronicled their shortcomings and encouraged attendance at the growing numbers of Church run schools. By 1890, after a succession of Education Acts, community-led initiatives had vanished. Universal free elementary education was available to all. And writing was firmly on the curriculum.

Opposition in the first decades of the century from church and state had not prevented people from learning to write before these major changes. One big story of nineteenth century England is the Story of Writing: or rather, thousands and thousands of 'learning stories' by people who acquired and used the skills of writing. It was writing which motivated them to learn literacy. Informal learning was the key mode: autodidacts, mutual improvement societies, (mutual) self help; Sunday Schools, family and community learning, and learning as part of social movements proliferated. Many self-help groups were highly ambitious in their reading and writing, with no notion of starting with 'the basics', but rather seeking to explore the 'lofty heights' of learning in the few waking hours outside work available to them.

Why did people want to learn to write? There was little expectation or encouragement, often the contrary – even within families. But for many thousands, there was a strong impulse, often longing, to write to family, friends and lovers separated by domestic service, migration for work, emigration or imprisonment; to help the next generation of children do better; to try to change the world (education was central to nineteenth century radical movements in their quest for 'Really Useful Knowledge'; to get a better job; to write poems. The work of over 1,000 19th century working-class writers, men and women has survived: autobiographies, published and unpublished, in which accounts of overcoming of obstacles to learning to write find pride of place. The search for self-expression, creativity and the power of writing in conflictual situations recur as motivational forces for learning.

Below is a taste of what people wrote about the material circumstances, the pleasures and the pains, the motivation and the methods:

'He had no pen, inks or paper, nor even a slate. But with broken pieces of pots, pipes, or chalk, he would be seen trying to write such letters as he had seen on doorsteps, door-stones and causeways'

*Joseph Lawson in
Letters to the Young on Progress
Pudsey (1887)*

By these writing exercises (*writing out hymns in a copy-book – UH*) my mind was led out in to ever-broadening streams of thought and investigation. In some book ... I found a poem entitled *The Covenanter's Crave*. I wrote it down and became deeply interested in it, and eagerly sought for further information concerning the Covenanter's sufferings and noble deeds.

*Adam Rushton
My Life as a farmer's boy (1909)*

My first attempt at rhyming was an epitaph on a dead toad which we found in the garden, and which we ...buried with great solemnity. I could not write the epitaph, for in the matter of writing I was quite beyond the other children of the age. My ignorance in this respect was a sore burden to them with my continual cry, 'Teach me to write!'

*Marianne Farningham
A Working Woman's Life (1907)*

How differently would people write now about their motivation to learn to write? One major difference is evidenced by in-depth interviews I conducted with a number of individual writers and community-based groups in the early 90s about their experiences of learning to write. People learning literacy as adults in a society with a fully developed educational system do not remember their initial learning experiences with the same exuberance. Failure stalks their memories. One learner compared the system to a national horse race in which 'the leaders were getting further and further away, and I finished the race as a complete failure – or was it the school that failed me?' Another woman, who said that her inability to spell frustrates and inhibits her, also writes that 'I always used to make up little stories for my children when they were small, and write snippets of poetry – very limited because my spelling wasn't too good. But I probably always wanted to write deep down and not really knowing how or having the time to.'

Yet, there are also striking similarities across time. One woman remarked that 'I used to scribble with chalk and things like that on the pavements, and remember things. And if people used to tell me their name ... I used to ask them how they spelt that, write it ... I always used to like things written down. And I used to love notes. If anybody used to write a note ... if it was only one sentence 'see you later' or 'I'll meet you tomorrow' I used to hand on to it and keep looking at it. I think this is how I learnt to read because I used to collect little things, snippets of anything. I ...had a big old handbag tucked under my arm - there was always lots of paper in it – snippets of bits and pieces that I'd collected'.

Margaret Bearfield. Brighton ⁵

How far has formal education recognised and provided for the motivational drives of adult literacy learners? The early years of a regulated school curriculum in England – the Revised Code of 1862 was heavily criticised by the more liberal parliamentarians, educators and inspectorates, led by Mathew Arnold. But learners, too, used their hard-won skills to critique the curriculum: 'It was sterile of results ...with detached observations about familiar things – 'the cat', 'the cow', and 'the parsnip' – what could a child get from it to kindle his enthusiasm for ... civilised learning' (*George Bourne, Change in the Village*). The early decades of state education organised the teaching of skills into 'standards', comparable to 'years' or 'levels' now. The curriculum evolved and the early approach of 'payment by results' was abandoned. But it remained the case that the Standards system meant that composition was not tackled until several years of education were complete. Writing came second to reading then, and arguably it has remained the second literacy skill. Paradoxically, the most visible skill, the one which people most long to learn even though they dread the exposure which mistakes and poor handwriting bring, is the most invisible skill.

The present day school system is graduated by 'key stages' in which writing is tested at regular intervals. The adult literacy core curriculum, a cornerstone of the government's **Skills for Life** strategy in England sets out standards at 5 levels (3 entry levels, level one and level 2, together with a pre-entry curriculum). Level 2 is equivalent to National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) or, just below GCSE, the exam 16 year olds take. Level 2 is a broad band. Getting people to a level 2 qualification in English and Maths is central to the **Skills for Life** strategy and an entitlement in the broader vocational Skills Strategy (2003). The adult literacy core curriculum does cover speaking, listening, reading and writing, in that order. Writing is arguably the skill least attended to, despite research evidence that writing is increasingly essential to jobs of all grades. The opening statement in the core curriculum writing section starts on a cautious note: 'although the need to write extensively may be limited for many adults, writing nevertheless remains an important form of communication. In everyday life it is difficult to avoid filling in forms...'. The introduction goes on to say that 'for many adults personal writing is a key to understanding and sharing their experiences'.

However, a strong message of the core curriculum is the dominance of form over content and of technical competence (spelling, punctuation, grammar) over creativity or critical intelligence. In the section where text generation is covered, two extracts from the core curriculum section on writing illustrates the approach:

Writing Composition

Adults should be taught to:

- Use written words and phrases to record or present information:
- Understand that writing is a way of representing language in a more permanent form than speech
- Understand that writing can be structured in different ways for different contexts
- Understand that writers have to plan and organise their thoughts before writing them down

the Adult Literacy Core Curriculum (Writing at Entry level 1) England 2001

Adults should be taught to:

- Plan and draft writing
- Judge how much to write and the level of detail to include
- Present information in a logical sequence
- Use language suitable for purpose and audience'

the Adult Literacy Core Curriculum (Writing at Level 1) England 2001

We can contrast this approach with the view of the one-time teacher, and a fierce critic of the national curriculum in schools, Philip Pulman, author of children's books and the 'His Dark Materials' trilogy:

'So what I say is: back to basics....They're often held to be things like spelling and grammar ...But as a matter of common observation, we all know that we can put the spelling right and fiddle with the grammar - how can something it's possible to leave till the last minute possibly be basic? But the joy of discovery, the thrill we feel when an idea strikes that might become a story - we can't add that on at the last minute. If that joy isn't nourishing the roots of the work, it's never going to show in the flower. That truly is basic. I'm all for the basics.' (TES, London 8.2.2002)

There is little sense in the core curriculum of the role of writing in developing creativity, self-expression, or critical thinking. Nor is there any sense of the possibility of ambition in a learner-writer to be a writer with a capital 'W' in the way earlier generations aspired to. Margaret Bearfield's comment still resonates 'what a wealth if women writers knuckled down to writing, what a store. When I was a girl only intellectuals wrote anyway. There were very few working-class writers - well I never saw any', Education has a powerful impact and people who had had a low education tend to withdraw into themselves' Beverly H., a black woman and learner-writer 'I think a white person general associates a black person with poverty'.

Why does the functional/technical emphasis on in the national core curriculum matter? Teachers are surely free to interpret the curriculum - and the section dedicated to writing gives ample room for teaching writing in a variety of ways, There is a quote from a Blake poem ('O Rose thou art sick'), and one from the autobiography of Tony Adams (Arsenal

and England footballer), which serve as illustrations of the breadth of strategies teachers can use. Two issues make the core curriculum a powerful driver of how writing is learned rather than a 'rough guide'. First, the growth in literacy provision which **Skills for Life** funding has enabled means that there are large numbers of underqualified, new, part-time teachers in the field. Their inexperience leads them to an over-literal implementation of the curriculum. Secondly, the insistence on planning, grammar and spelling in teaching writing feeds in to people's fear of exposure and repeated failure. Thirdly, the curriculum is part of a wider 'learning infrastructure' developed as part of **Skills for Life**. The curriculum is the means to learners' achievement. Achievement is measured primarily (for literacy, numeracy and ESOL learners) by the new National Test. That test does not measure writing. It does measure spelling, but only requiring the identification of correctly spelled words in a multiple choice assessment..

Another reason for the importance of ensuring writing is taught in a way which 'catches' the imagination and sustains the motivation of learners is that there is now significant research, including by the National Research and Development Centre, that, as mentioned above, writing is increasingly needed in the workplace in jobs at every grade – and more and more through the medium of ICT. Writing is also needed for the portfolios assembled as part of the assessment regime required for vocational qualifications (NVQs). Since literacy learning is often and increasingly taught in the context of other learning goals (hairdressing, horticulture, football coaching, engineering), writing will become a more and important set of skills and practices in work and life.

A further issue in the teaching of writing is the view of the English inspectorates, a powerful influence on policy and practice in the UK. In 2003 the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) published a thematic review of quality in adult literacy teaching and learning. In their view, there is widespread poor practice, leading to high levels of 'drop out'. One of these is the flat and often boring approaches to learning, exacerbated by novice, underqualified teachers with inadequate workplace support. In part, these are the unintended consequences of policy. Another report by the OFSTED inspectorate for schools which is also responsible for education for 16-19 year olds and teacher education, also criticises HE-based teacher training as neglectful of subject knowledge and subject specific pedagogy. Teachers have had little training in the teaching of writing. NRDC's research supports the 'snapshot' picture which inspectors see on their visits. In addition, the Individual Learning Plans against which individual learners' progress and achievements are measured reinforce a learning system in which individualised learning has become isolated, fragmented learning experiences. There is little group work – often the stimulus for expressive writing – and not much talk in the classroom.

So what does NRDC's research say? First of all, we are still at an early stage. We have published, in July this year a report from Phase One 2002-3. In this phase we undertook a systematic and a theoretical review of teaching and learning writing. Secondly have undertaken, as part of Phase One of the study, a small review of current practice. The review of research has unearthed very little empirical evidence on the teaching and learning of writing. What studies there are, are part of studies of reading; or studies of 'literacy' which focus mainly on reading. There is an urgent need for work with a primary focus on writing. Research is needed which helps determine variables which relate to learners' progress, using sound methodologies. Themes which have emerged from the review of research show that there are several possible indicators of learners' progress. They are:

- Use of authentic materials and activities
- A collaborative, group approach
- A focus on writing as a process
- Setting learning in a meaningful context

- Varied practice
- Encouraging critical thinking about writing.

The review of practice in phase one has things to say about teachers and about learners and learning. These are:

Teachers

- Teachers have a strong focus on individual learners' needs
- The impact/influence of research and literature on writing is indirect and eclectic
- Teachers lay emphasis on writing as communication (as does the core curriculum document)
- There is a high use of exercises which are not contextualised, particularly at 'word level'.

Learners

- Place greater emphasis on getting spelling and punctuation correct
- Have a wide range of goals and motivations in relation to writing
- Are generally very positive about the role of IT as part of learning to write.

Overall, learners judged writing to be harder than reading. They tended to see it as a reward for reading, once they'd mastered the basics of spelling and grammar. Their comments included:

"Writing is much more difficult, there's a lot more involved"

"I find writing harder.... punctuation, content, tenses, spelling"

"You have to think of your own words and know how to write them"

"Its harder 'cos you have to have the ideas in your head first"

A significant number of learners however are clear that reading is more difficult.

"I don't read a lot - I usually forget what I've read by the end of the page. I don't mind writing emails, using a keyboard."

In Phase 2, which started in Spring 2004, the study will correlate 'naturally occurring' practice with learners' progress, learners' attitudes and learners' uses of writing. It will test dimensions based on the emerging themes and issues from phase one. In addition, we will be collecting qualitative data through interviews with teachers and learners.

There is still a wide open space for research (and development work) into writing. We would like to discuss this with research colleagues in Australia. Our thinking and work to date suggests that further research could address some of the following issues:

- The uses of ICT in the teaching and learning of writing
- What the sticking points for learners are
- Whether findings from research on writing in schools, e.g. the importance of the systematic teaching of spelling, grammar etc, and use of meta-language hold true for adults (writing has been the least successful element of the National Literacy and Numeracy strategies and the 'literacy hour' in schools)
- How to teach writing as part of integrated/embedded learning across the curriculum
- How to re-learn some of the tools used for writing which appear to have lost their place in adult learning: language experience, generating text for sharing with other learners, including publishing of student writing

- The part writing could play in a culture of adult learning which listens more to what learners want and aims to boost their confidence more than playing to their fears and sense of inadequacy
- How teachers can offer learners 'mystery, chance and silence' – and how people skills, uses and practices develop when they experience creativity and are able to make their own meanings.

1804-2004: How much has changed?

The recent Department for Education and Skills (DfES) 'Survey of Need and Impact' states that 'Adults living in households in social class 1 were roughly four times as likely as those in social class V to reach Level 2 or above in the literacy test (67% compared to 16%). More than one third of those in class V were classified at Entry Level 3 or below, including 12 per cent at Entry level 1 or below. A similar difference in performance was noted in the numeracy test'. There was no significant gender difference in literacy, although men did better at numeracy. Literacy and numeracy are still overwhelmingly class issues.

As far as writing is concerned Margaret Bearfield's remark that 'When I was a girl, only intellectuals wrote anyway. There were very few working-class writers – well I never saw any' still largely holds. The emphasis on skills for work plays a major part in cultural and social exclusion. The model analysed by Stephen Black⁶ shares a language with Skills for Life. The appeal to prospective learners is not to learn to write, to develop thinking skills or social practices of literacy. It is that 'Good literacy and numeracy skills tend to be associated with good wages'⁷. The curriculum is important, because the promise of the strategy is work, better paid jobs and, according to Black, the responsibility to support the economy, the health of which is dependent on better skills. If the curriculum is the means to this end, the stress is on getting the skills which it prioritises. These are spelling, grammar and structure and focused communication fit for purpose. Ideas, expression come second. The research into writing in higher education, notably the work of Peter Elbow, Mina Shaughnessy and a hundred thousand literacy teachers - suggests this may not work. Philip Pulman, by many accounts a brilliant teacher who got results – may be right. You will get the improvement in spelling and grammar somehow. You may lose the ideas and motivation if you privilege them. Grammar belongs to the established dominant culture which defines, through its various mechanisms, what is correct at any one time. It is an effective policer of effort and quality.

Nevertheless, adult learners remain a determined group of people. For over 200 years, literacy learners have found spaces and places in which to make their own meanings, explore the knowledge they want to acquire and work creatively with the available systems and structure. Policy, and learning practices are different. They meet, but each has its own momentum. Teachers can act on, and develop both; but nurturing learners' motivation is the prime goal.

Each week I go to college
To learn to read and spell
I work on the computer and hope that I can tell
The difference between a verb and a noun
And then I have to write them down
I know that I am often wrong
But keep on trying all day long,
Each week I know that I improve
And on to harder things will move
I do enjoy the time I spend
And hope to learn more in the end
I'll carry on and do my best

And hope that I will pass the test

Mary Baker, 72 years

There have been continuing writers' circles, community publishing groups and a few acclaimed working class novelists and chroniclers. But major shifts towards the inclusive 'common culture' sought by Richard Hoggart and others in the 1960s has not taken place. In adult literacy learning, the culture of writing has diminished. The use of books in the classroom has diminished as worksheets and individualised learning have flourished. The gathering and discussion of stories, views, analyses and experiences, and the publishing of student writing in literacy have all diminished, despite the massive increase in funding.

There is silence in many classrooms. But it is not the silence of which Philip Pulman writes. It is often a restless, uneasy silence, a lack of talk, the sense of learners waiting for individual attention from a teacher, before he/she moves on to the next student.

It is time to recognise and act on the need for the instrumental, the communicative, the creative and the affective power of writing. To create the noise which precede the productive silence and the thinking, which will make writing visible. Teachers and learners need a taste of honey: Stories, stories, once (more) upon a time

Ursula Howard
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