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Teaching writing in English lesson at secondary school

As English teachers, we aspire for our students to be capable, motivated and confident writers. But the challenges we face in engaging our students in purposeful writing, in generating their enthusiasm for writing and in developing their writing skills, knowledge and attitudes are substantial and multifaceted. It is the case that the social and private worlds of many of the young people we teach are increasingly framed and negotiated through written language that is instantaneous, often fragmented, non-linear and typically conveyed at the 'point of utterance' as direct speech transferred through a digital platform. Text messaging, Instagram, Twitter, blogging and other forms of social media have become normative channels for (amongst other things) constructing identity; forming and sustaining relationships; defining an individual's place in the world; and interacting in a myriad of contexts from the local to the global.

Immersed as they are in the affordances of digital technology, many of our students are dexterous and confident when it comes to managing the conventions of idiomatic and transactional writing associated with social networking and other forms of colloquial online communication. When it comes to the more complex writing demands of the school curriculum, however, students' proficiency in the range of required literate forms (such as, for example, the discursive essay and the sustained narrative) remains fundamental to their academic success and foremost among the pedagogical challenges of English teachers. While young people are writing more and more regularly than at any other time in human history, their everyday modes of written communication and their motivations for such writing are not readily transferrable to the academic context of school writing that privileges and rewards "written, literate English [as] a distinct dialect from spoken English, almost a separate language that has to be acquired".

Equipping students with the wide repertoire of writing capacities necessary to succeed in the world of school and work depends in large part on the pedagogical and theoretical choices of their teacher.

Our purpose here is to offer English teachers and other educators working with adolescents, a range of practical, research-based approaches for developing their students' proclivity for and proficiency and confidence in writing, within and beyond the school context. The content of this paper is based on a professional learning course delivered in 2015 through the NSW Teachers' Federation Centre

for Professional Learning. Where appropriate, hyperlinks to web and print-based resources are included. Before exploring the research-based principles of teaching writing and what these mean for teaching, it is worth pausing for a moment to consider some of the myths about writing that can operate as impediments to the design and implementation of a successful writing program.

These include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. The 'product' of writing is more important than the 'process' of writing;
2. Only a select minority or inspired elite are or can be accomplished writers;
3. Writing tasks should be undertaken in the main by students in their own time outside of class;
4. Writing is an activity mostly/most appropriately undertaken by an individual;
5. Students won't be motivated to write unless it is assessable, so all writing must be linked to an assessment task;
6. Students must be taught techniques and grammar before they can begin to write effectively;
7. Creative writing is less important in secondary school than essay writing, especially in the senior years;
8. Creative writing and critical writing must be taught separately;
9. Creative writing is difficult to teach and cannot be rigorously assessed;
10. Form and content can be separated. Form does not follow function;
11. Writing to learn the conventions of privileged forms (such as, for example, persuasive texts, narratives, essays) is an end in itself;
12. The quality of a student's writing does not depend on quantity and quality of their reading;
13. To teach writing effectively you do not need to be a writer.

Each of these limiting myths has accreted around the pedagogy of writing, and constitute a set of common assumptions about the nature of the writing process; the place and purpose of writing in students' lives; the false dichotomy between the creative and the critical; the role of the teacher in facilitating writing development; and the relationship between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation on student engagement, enjoyment and accomplishment. These myths are redressed both explicitly and implicitly throughout this paper by attention to what we know from research and best practice in teaching writing and the purpose of writing in subject English.

The beating heart of English is 'story': your story, your students' stories, and the infinite and endlessly flowing spring of others' stories. All writing can be considered as a form of story in the broadest sense, regardless of the form it may take. A news article, a film review, a scientific report, or a discursive essay can be viewed as just as much a part of the continuum of human story-telling as a narrative, memoir or play. Writing and reading decrease our sense of isolation. They deepen and widen and expand our sense of life: they feed the soul. When writers make us shake our heads with the exactness of their prose and their truths, and even make us laugh about ourselves or life, our buoyancy is restored. We are given a shot at dancing with, or at least clapping along with, the absurdity of life, instead of being squashed by it over and over again. It's like singing on a boat during a terrible storm at sea. You can't stop the raging storm, but singing can change the hearts and spirits of the people who are together on that ship.

At the end of our work I want to say that as English educators is the ideal of nurturing students who leave our classrooms capable, confident, vibrant and well-equipped to meet the challenges of living and working beyond school. Our legacy to each young person we teach is far more than the measurable set of knowledge, skills and understandings that are assessed and reported on throughout their secondary education. To inspire a love of and acuity for language, in all its endless manifestations; to empower students to 'write their world'; and to know that their lives have been shaped for the better because of our attentive and informed teaching: this is part of the legacy that, because it cannot be quantified through instrumentalist means, represents our greatest gift, privilege and responsibility.

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