

# Writes Of Passage – Sharing Our Perceptions Of Writing

Jonny Walker  
@OtherWiseEdu

## Background:

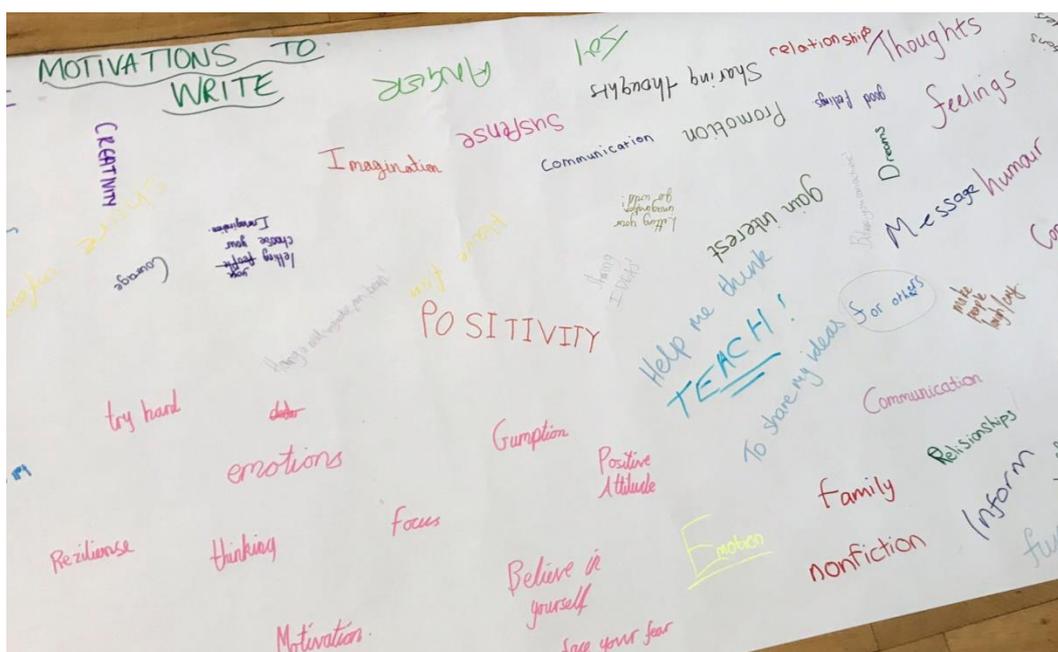
I lead OtherWise Education, and run collaborative writing projects with schools. This case study relates to our first Year 5 'Writes of Passage' network - we work with Elmhurst Primary, Nelson Primary, Gallions Primary, Keir Hardie Primary, St Helen's RC Primary, Dersingham Primary and Southern Road Primary, all in Newham. This network is co-facilitated by me and Jo Castro.

## Principle(s) in focus:

1. Building a community of writers
3. Reading, sharing and talking about writing

## Aims:

The aims were to encourage discussion and exchange between participants in the network, to model the ideal values of the writing community and to gain an understanding of children's and teachers' perceptions on writing and what motivates and moves them to write. This element of the session took place in the first hour, and the children and staff did not know each other. Therefore, the sharing of perceptions of writing was a way to begin interacting and engaging with each other, and learning about each other as writers and as people.



## Description:

We began with activities to promote basic talking and listening. The group - adults included - formed a circle and each member was encourage to shout their name. This enabled us to learn names quickly, and ensure we were all pronouncing names correctly. We then moved into a choral 'roll call' song, with voluntary solo participation - those wishing to do so could step into the circle and improvise a verse.

My name is \_\_\_\_\_ - I like \_\_\_\_\_ - And when I do it - I \_\_\_\_\_ -

Again, this served as a good soft benchmark for pupils' confidence and willingness to share in this manner. From this circle, we then began asking questions about writing, as a means to introduce and welcome members to the group.



*We are all going to be working together across the year as a writing community. For it to be something we all enjoy and for it to be something we can all learn from, we can have an honest discussion about writing. I am sure we all have things that we like and things we don't.*

After this preamble, children and teachers were invited to wander around the circle, meet at least five new people from other schools (children or adults) and to talk with them about what they like and dislike. Due time was given for participants to have a sequence of meaningful conversations on the topic.

We then pulled everybody back together, and invited contributions from the whole group. Beginning with **what we like about writing** and moving onto **what we dislike**, the questions were posed and children and adults were encouraged just to speak up whenever they saw a lull or silence. It was emphasised that nobody *has* to share publicly. Children also wrote collectively, on a piece of paper, what motivates them to write. Why do they do it?

The richness, honesty and poignancy of the feedback gave Jo and I a vivid sense of 'where we were at' with this group at the beginning of our year together, and led us to other impactful conclusions.

## Impact:

**Building a community of writers** - This task allowed us to welcome and introduce the group in a way that was honest, celebratory and inviting, clearly articulating the WfP principles underpinning the work that we would conduct. We were also able to gain an early insight into these children's writer-identities and this could help inform our future sessions.

**Reading, sharing and talking about writing** - By launching our project with talk about the life of the writer, we exemplified why this kind of talk is helpful and - in fact - integral to the development of a writerly culture. Children and adults, even those who (we were subsequently told) tended to be reserved and quiet, generally felt confident enough to share their real views on writing.

Firstly, this activity gave us rich insights into the starting points of the group, with regards their relationship with writing. In line with similar research conducted by [National Literacy Trust on Children and Poetry \(2018\)](#) and by [Ross Young and Phil Ferguson](#) in the Writing for Pleasure Manifesto, pupil voice emphasised that children enjoy and are motivated by the affective and expressives realm of writing, and enjoy the feelings of freedom and creativity. Alongside this general 'trend', seen among pupils and teachers alike, other points related to:

- the relaxing feeling of writing
- being able to amuse and share with others
- combating boredom

When responding about the elements of writing - and the experience of school-based writing, specifically - there was an interesting diversity of views. There was a general consensus that the frustration was often borne of too much prescription and too little choice.



Several children specifically mentioned disliking writing frames and planning grids, suggesting too much time is spent forcing their writing into these structures. Children also raised the fact that writing often hurt their hands, that they disliked writing in pencils as opposed to pens, and that they hated how time constrained the writing process was.

What was particularly salient was the gusto with which **teachers began sharing their own perceptions** on the things they dislike about the writing process. Publicly, and in the forum alongside their pupils, they complained that the accountability for writing, and the focus on including particular grammatical features, 'killed' the joy of writing. One teacher spoke about the lack of creativity as a teacher of writing and as a writer too.

## Reflection:

Launching our Writes of Passage network in this way was especially powerful because it consciously and strongly distanced us from the kinds of approach to writing that are commonly practised in pupils' schools. We did draw out the strengths of these approaches too, recognising the benefits of being able to punctuate well and structure ideas coherently, but nonetheless, the 'buzz' came about through the discussion of the things that frustrate the group. The discussion enabled Jo and I to quickly position ourselves as people who *understood* the writing process in school, but who were consciously wanting to help sculpt a writing culture that was much more focused on developing volition, agency and celebration of idiosyncrasy.

The particularly poignant reflection for me was that I had expected at least *some* resistance from the teachers, many of whom were highly experienced in the teaching of writing, having been in the classroom for upwards of 10, 15 and in one case 30 years. Whilst it is common to hear criticism of the teaching of writing from teachers, I expected perhaps more cynicism from staff about our confident embrace of a **Writing For Pleasure** approach. Whilst seeking to be level-headed in this reflection, and limiting my conclusions to the specific group of adults involved, it was remarkable the impact that the session had upon them. I had initially only provided special writing books for pupils, expecting teachers may prefer to use their own - the staff members collectively approached us to ask for their own writing books.

- One colleague contacted Jo and I after the session to talk about how helpful it was to see writing as a personal project, and that it will help her to cope with challenges she is facing in her life.
- Another colleague spoke to Jo to say that the writing sessions will give her an opportunity to tell a story she has wanted to tell about her life since she arrived in the UK, decades before.

The way in which the network was launched - with open, honest and analytical reflection on writing, set the tone for a session in which participants who were new to the approaches of WfP pedagogy could quickly harness it and experiment with alternative forms of writing.

Is this something teachers could do with their classes? Is this something teachers could do together in a staff meeting?

Please give it a try!