

How to teach GREATER DEPTH Writing



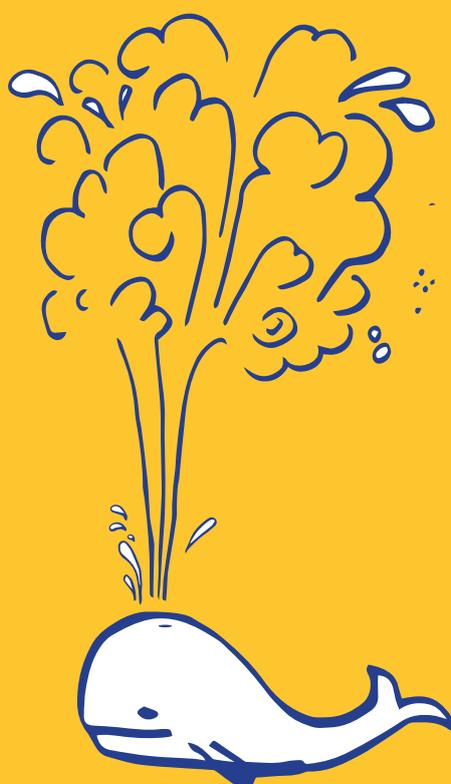
It can be easy to forget our most promising writers - but they deserve better, says **Felicity Ferguson**



When I was 10 and new to secondary school, I wrote my first set homework assignment for R.E. - a recount of one of the seven plagues of Egypt. After a few days my book came back with the depressing comment: is this all your own work? Mortified, because it was my own work and I'd written it like a story, with my usual enthusiasm and emotional investment, I approached the teacher on the pretext I hadn't been able to read her comment. "Well," came the reply, "it was so vivid." I said I had written it myself - but I could see she didn't believe me. To this day I still feel the injury to my early strong sense of me as a writer, and the need I had to own and assert my 'talent'.

As a pupil I would have qualified as a 'greater depth' writer. I had a natural drive to write from an early age. I wrote from desire, with pleasure, absorption, satisfaction; it was an act of escapism. I wrote a great deal at home - stories, unfinished novels, programmes for shows put on in a friend's backyard. I even edited my own magazine. My memory is that in those days we were never asked to do any of these different kinds of writing in primary school. Luckily for me, my intrinsic motivation was strong enough to carry me through as a writer into my adult life - but this may not be the case for all children who are capable of writing at greater depth if their motivation and therefore their pleasure are not fostered.

I have recently known several pupils who were clearly outstanding as writers. They were all highly motivated, persistent, committed and self-regulating, and all wrote extensively and with pleasure at home. The small body of research on the subject stresses the importance of the environment



if children are to maintain the desire to write to a high standard - parents, teachers and the home and school ethos. However, it suggests that some classroom strategies could actually have an adverse effect on their motivation. So what kind of teaching would be the most valuable for talented writers? Do we in fact need to do anything to support them or, with the demands of getting other less experienced children to the 'expected standard', is it enough to praise and showcase their writing but then leave them to their own devices, trusting that they will always write something good? My view is that it's not. Like everyone else, they need good teaching and writing that challenges them. Here's how:

Make a classroom community of writers

Here, writing by teachers and pupils alike is shared, discussed and responded to in a safe and positive atmosphere where all are seen as writers. A talented writer, like anyone else, needs to feel part of important social structures such as these, where children learn things of value from each other.

Teach the writing processes

Being explicitly taught the writing processes means that confident, talented writers become free to think about how they can personalise their approach and develop their voice. Many professional writers have reflected on their processes, and these reflections could be shared and discussed.

Create purposeful, authentic writing projects

Children will be engaged and motivated if writing projects are felt by them to be relevant to their lives and existing knowledge - in other words to have personal meaning for them. Putting their own idea into the genre being studied immediately creates an authentic purpose and a personal connection to the writing.

Give time, space and freedom

Writing daily and having agency to write on topics of their own choice, for their own purposes and at their own pace is the key to motivation, efficacy and pleasure. The opportunity to write in this way at school may resemble the experience of writing at home, where often much of talented pupils' most creative, varied and

successful writing takes place. Having time and space on a daily basis allows them to practise and improve their craft. This, and the teacher's interest, contributes to a writer's sense of self as someone engaged in important work, but this won't be maintained if children are constantly forced into writing to someone else's design. A diet of teacher-chosen topics may affect motivation adversely, and will certainly result in the writer losing the feeling that writing is a real-world activity, has a personal point and is purposeful.

Become a writer-teacher

A writer-teacher (a writer who teaches and a teacher who writes) is well placed to nurture talented writers. A teacher's engagement in personal writing works to sustain pleasure, motivation and tenacity in the students, and makes it possible to share difficulties, give advice, suggest strategies and provide immediate feedback at a high level.

Read and write for pleasure

These two are strongly interconnected. Talented writers are likely to be committed readers, but it is still important for them to be provided with a rich and eclectic classroom library based on the teacher's knowledge of children's literature and on peer recommendations. They need to feel part of a community of readers, with time to talk with others about their reading. We know that children who read more write more and better, using their reading, often unconsciously, as mentor texts.



Felicity Ferguson is a literacy consultant and a national writing representative for The UKLA. For details of her research rich CPD, visit LiteracyForPleasure.Wordpress.com/CPD

Teachers need to use children's reading experiences and take advantage of the many opportunities for showing them how to link their own writing to the way in which their current favourite book is written. Plant an idea. Say, "You could do something like that..."

Will my talented writers write with the same desire and pleasure as they progress through the education system? I don't know. Maybe they will, if there can be a balance between the demands of the curriculum and assessment practices and the freedom and space to write with ease and engagement on self-chosen topics.

GOING DEEPER

Encourage your greater depth writers to...

- Develop and use their own preferred writing processes.
- Take part in writerly talk about craft and process.
- Experiment with narrative structures, point of view, chronology, flashback, cinematic devices such as 'zooming in', or using a wide-view 'lens' to set a scene.
- Be playful with genre – for example, by combining a narrative with persuasion or explanation.
- Introduce their own voice into non-fiction pieces and express a personal response.
- Notice in their own reading what writers do, and draw on it in their own writing.
- Balance character, setting and plot. Develop settings as additional characters.
- Build a story around a psychological theme, e.g. fear. Use a character as a metaphor for the theme, idea or emotion.
- Bring writing from home into school and use it to influence school writing.
- Collect in a notebook striking words, phrases and sentences culled from their reading and their social lives, to use in their writing later. Show them yours!
- Revise their pieces thoroughly, taking out rather than always adding in.

