

Hunter is writing...

BERNARD COHEN
HERE PRESENTS
INSIGHTS FROM
HIS WRITING
WORKSHOPS
FOR CHILDREN
INCLUDING
THE 'AUTHORS
IN PRIORITY
SCHOOLS
PROGRAM', AN
ASA INITIATIVE
SUPPORTED BY
THE FEDERAL
DEPARTMENT
OF EDUCATION
SCIENCE AND
TECHNOLOGY
AND THE NSW
DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION AND
TRAINING.

HUNTER WAS WRITING the longest sentence of his life. The five-year-old's newly learned handwriting was a little shaky, and perhaps some form of internal randomiser determined on which side of the letters a, b and d he placed the stick. He hadn't yet learned to measure a space between words by placing his finger on the page, so as he moved across the page from left to right his writing pretty much resembled an unkempt centipede. But he was writing, and he looked very pleased with himself.

After a few minutes he hit the right-hand page edge. This occurred part way through the word 'about' (I can't recall the spelling) and, not having developed strategies for word breaks, Hunter continued "about" around the corner.

By the time he reached the end of 'about' he had serious right-to-left momentum, so he kept going until he'd returned to the left-side edge.

In an inner-Sydney intensive English class for newly arrived teenagers, mainly refugees, the younger boys are writing sentences about soccer stars – how the crowd danced when Ronaldinho scored.

“
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He gets it, nods
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”

Sixteen and eighteen-year-old Africans want to record true and extremely harrowing autobiographical stories. One young man doesn't know where to begin. I'm explaining how fragments and anecdotes and pieces of experience can accumulate. He gets it, nods and starts to write.

Five years earlier, in London, I had taken a lesson on how not to teach writing. In a class in an impoverished South London borough, a ten-year-old stuck his hand up. Philip wanted to know how to spell 'went'. I wrote it on the board. In the following hour, he asked the same of four more single-syllable words. In fact, for the entire workshop, almost all questions from all students in Philip's class were about spelling. I watched some of the kids slowly work their way down their pages – their task was to write stories based in a London museum – but by the end of the workshop, Philip had written just one sentence of six single-syllable words. He had correctly transcribed the five I had written on the board, but the sixth was incorrect. By my judgment, the workshop had not worked for Philip.

Afterwards, I asked the

My favourite animal is a dog and my favourite animal is a fish.
Why can't a fish live in a classroom? Because there is no water.
Why can't an elephant come into the classroom? Because it can't fit through the door.
Everyone chased after the fly. The tiger chased after the fly. The giraffe chased after the fly.

My favourite animal is a dog and my favourite animal is a fish.

[msrb: not sure of translation!]

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By Connor aged 6.

class teacher for feedback on the workshop. In the discussion I lamented to her that I had failed to engage Philip.

To the contrary, she was pleased. She said this workshop was the first time Philip had ever completed a whole sentence.

There's a pervasive but false debate about teaching literacy: whether phonics or whole word approaches produces the better literacy standards, with much emphasis in the parliaments and media on snapshot results which are claimed to show rising or (more usually) falling levels.

It's a false debate because, first, in practice (and in the last eighteen months I've taught writing in dozens of less well-off and middle-class classrooms), teachers mostly do their best to adapt to the different learning styles of individual students, drawing on a sliding ratio of sounding out and word recognition tools.

Second, we all recognise the sorts of things which improve or accelerate children's early literacy: small group or one-on-one attention; parental involvement etc. For politicians continuing to blather about Falling Standards and the three Bs, I'd recommend a ten-year implementation of twelve kids per class from kindergarten to year two, and a 25% increase in teachers' salaries.

That said, as far as narrative literacy goes, never underestimate the capacity of a five-year-old, although most start school without reading or writing, most are very familiar with a range of forms, and most understand — from TV ads, if nowhere else — how to tell a complete story in 30 seconds. Children have highly sophisticated literary aesthetics from very early, covering syntax, pacing, language choices.

The first issue to address in teaching creative writing to children is countering the rush

to a conclusion. Writing gives children the power to make things happen, and the impulse is to make everything happen early and often.

So forget about tracking the twice? annual phonics versus whole-word oscillations. Instead, authors ought to be jumping up and down to implement creative writing as a third way into literacy for students — a tool which will vastly accelerate Australia's literariness and a means to a creative and inventive culture.

Teaching writing through story making means students focus on producing rather than consuming writing.

Of course, teaching creative writing as a tool for improving and broadening literacy and a means to greater literariness presupposes that creative writing can be taught, and this brings us to a second seasonal argument (and one which 'apparates' almost as regularly as articles on the benefits of red wine). This is the regular rehashing of the impossibility of teaching creative writing: innate genius versus application of crafty perfectionism.

Perhaps the educational outcomes are ahistorical, completely immeasurable without counteracting the measuring stick just a little — how much 'talent' and innate creativity did the young so-called writer take with them into the classroom? who says this execrable *test* is literature anyway? or Writer X, studied writing at University Y so therefore that's where s/he learnt it.

And whilst this article treats the careful objective line, I ought to declare some experience on both edges

of this conversation, at my old uni, UTS, the writing area advertisements list alumni who are literary prize-winners, and over half the members of one of my classes back in the 1980s went on to write published books — from the highest of literature through to the highest of pseudonymous teen pulp — and these books built on a wide range of personal histories over many aspects of Australian life (immigrant, inner-city and rural; a diverse range of education backgrounds including the now standard high school through university as well as some with very much less previous formal education).

On the other hand, whilst the study of creative writing has general acceptance in the US, it's been a different story here, where mainstream media reportage seeks out the organic storyteller. I copied the blurb for a criticism of my first novel *Tourism* (1992) was that it reeked of the academy: 'Reading *Tourism* is like clutching at snowflakes as they fall... It comes as no surprise to find the author has studied writing... It isn't worth \$14.95...' (*The Australian*).

But the back and forth is all a little precious.

So lighten up.

It's a Good Thing to have creative skills and literacy in combination, just as it's pretty useful for non-engineers to have a basis in maths and science. We all get a better understanding of hooks and bridges, even if we don't all write or build them.

For *Australian Author* readers, perhaps you'll agree with me that members of the literary communities

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can bring much more to the classroom than the empirical descriptions of genres currently circulated.

Narrative according to posters displayed throughout New South Wales primary schools, comprises four distinct elements: Orientation; Complication; Resolution and Closure. ("A 'recount' is slightly less complicated; it is made up of Orientation, Sequence of Events and Conclusion.")

I'm trying to get the eight-year-olds in one small group to put a bit of texture in their writing. To inspire them, I tell them about my journey to the workshop: "I got in my car, drove down Booth Street, and then I arrived. Here I am!" Good story."

We all agreed it was terrible.

"How about this?" I was driving along Booth Street when suddenly I saw a rhinoceros in the middle of the road. I lowered its head towards me and began to amble and then to gallop towards my car."

"What?" interrupted Isabel. "That's a Complication."

"It was," I said, "quite inconvenient."

For me, Isabel's comment succinctly expressed the problem of setting up creative writing models as part of the school English curriculum: namely, writing ought to be more than – and children ought to experience and learn it as more than – pouring ideas into containers.

Especially after receiving praise for a piece, children ask about "publishing" it. This usually means typing up and printing out, but I can discern a continuum from this thinking to the idea of the published book on a shelf.

Children have a very different imagined relationship with media than the way I remember thinking about media as a child. I remember thinking how lucky the kids who appeared with Miss He'lene on Romper Room were, and that real media were probably intimidating and certainly unreachably.

In 2007, Australian children have a different idea of where media are: they think, far from being hidden and exclusive, media are everywhere.

One July Saturday morning at about 8 o'clock, I was standing in a large Sydney city bookshop for the launch of *You Know What*.

The bookshop was crowded. There were dozens of enthralled cardboard boxes. A minor celebrity shared the stage with publishing and bookshop management. The audience comprised about 80 children, 150 adults and 250 media.

The book was launched and camera crews lined up to question the child customers. Children seemed to regard the interviews as a small inconvenience (but not the sort of thing to object to). The kids were certainly not surprised or fazed by the glare of cameras.

And as to the status of literature, perhaps more telling than the popularity of wizard tales is this anecdotal anecdote: near the exit, the shelf where new Australian fiction used to be was now occupied by various get rich quick books – how to build property portfolios using other people's money; technical stock analysis; how to make money on the internet, and so forth.

We may think about media convergence as the

idea we can interact with our televisions and watch TV through our computer monitors – my phrase for this is 'The Office Chair Model, where depending on the level of interaction (or passivity) demanded by your media intervention, you wheel closer to or further from the screen.

I take a group of 25 primary-school aged writers from inner-Sydney to record stories for Radio National's 'The Night Air' program. They sit patiently or re-edit their work as they wait for presenter Brent Clough to take them into the studio. Two six-year-olds are breathily with nerves, but a ten-year-old natural puser has no trouble with his tale of various objects and people exploding hilariously.

Once children are inventing a different literary, issues are long standing literary

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concerns about the writing process, themes and pacing:

1. Make marks on the blank page as soon as possible; otherwise you're always about to start.

2. Don't kill the main character in the first three sentences.

3. Unlike children, characters in stories don't always need to stop for a poo.

4. Reading out can help with voice and punctuation.

And if you need rules, here are two for a start:

Rule one: if the kids seem to want them, help them make up some rules.

Rule two: spelling can cause literary paralysis.

Creativity is often about licence. I don't believe that everyone has a book just waiting for some experienced and competent midwifery (any more than we've each got a bridge in us), but it is

easy to see which kids feel free to create and to value their own creativity.

Early this year I surveyed two groups, one of mainly middle class kids in an after-school workshop and one a gifted and talented group in a 'priority school' in inner-Sydney. Both groups had completed similar sets of writing tasks, and each had been equally prolific and articulate in their writing. They used to select from a range of responses, strongly agree to strongly disagree to each of ten propositions. One was 'I wrote a lot'. The middle class group nearly all agreed or strongly agreed. The 'priority school' group disagreed or strongly disagreed.

In my Intensive English group, a young Burmese is writing a rap about sunset, an Iraqi favourably

compares her imaginary country to the unspeakably violent place she was driven from; Year 4 students at a 'priority school' (ie, underprivileged), write about places ruled by children. I read comic writers and metaphysicists, romantics and anthropomorphisers, horror and mystery writers and stories about the spoiled and popular kids getting there come-uppance and the show kids making it big in sports.

Is teaching creative writing the path to an increasingly brilliant Australian literature and lively literary culture? Take the risk...

We took a long road home, and as we drove into the night, the car headlights began to look like glowing eyes in the darkness, and the taillights like fireflies just turning

off their lights. I told my parents this and they laughed and said I saw the world in a different way than other people.

'In what way do other people see those headlights and taillights?', asked, interested.

'Well...just like headlights and taillights... I guess,' they answered almost in unison.

That didn't make any sense at all. What was the point of anything existing if it didn't look like something else? Anyway, I shut my eyes for the rest of the trip, and let dreams of taillights and fireflies fill my head.

Holly Dawson, aged 16

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