

The Process Writing Project: 'A Special Place'

Teacher: Rachael Clarke School: Alderley Edge School for Girls

Introduction

A class of Year 8 students at an Independent girls' school participated in a series of 10 lessons on writing about personal experiences. The class consisted of twenty 12-13 year old girls, with a wide range of abilities and interests. The topic was 'A Special Place' and students were encouraged to reflect on their own lives and experiences as the main stimulus for the writing project. Students' development of their own ideas and experiences was central to the revision process. All students were able to communicate a personal account about a special place, first through discussion and drama activities, and later in a piece of writing which was revised between 2 and 4 times.

Overview of the Process Writing Scheme

An overview of the scheme is as follows:

1. The teacher introduced the writing project and gave a brief overview of the process to follow. The title 'A Special Place' was shared and briefly discussed. Students were asked to think of a place that is special to them and find (or draw) images, pictures etc of the place.
2. The teacher shared her experience of 'A Special Place', showing an image of Venice on the IWB and explaining why it was so special.
3. Students talked in small groups about their special place and why it is significant. Students took it in turns to show their images to the group and discuss the place – peers could ask questions and make comments.
4. Students devised a freeze-frame based on one of the images and performed this to the class. Classmates were given the opportunity to ask questions about the image and discuss the overall experience.
5. Students discussed three questions; 'Why do people share their experiences?', 'Why is 'A Special Place' an interesting topic?'
6. Students discussed 'What is a first draft and why is it useful?' and 'what makes a productive writing workshop?'
7. Students drafted first attempts individually in class
8. Students swapped their work with a partner and were given the opportunity to ask questions, clarify points, make suggestions, etc.
9. Students considered what they would like to retain/develop from their first draft. Some used highlighting/colour-coding, underlining, bullet-points or mind maps to do this.
10. Students wrote 2nd drafts individually in class.

11. Students shared examples of effective expression from their 2nd drafts – each student read a sentence or two aloud to the group.
12. Most students wrote a 3rd draft individually in class, some continued with their 2nd draft.
13. The teacher held a one-to-one tutorial with each student in class time to discuss the revision process.
14. Students completed a penultimate draft (usually the 2nd or 3rd draft).
15. Students discussed 'what is peer assessment?' and 'why is it useful?'
16. Students peer assessed the penultimate draft in small groups using a 'workshop' style approach in which students read, commented on and discussed each individual's piece of writing in a group of 3 or 4.
17. Students fed back to the whole class, commenting on the main strengths and areas for development emerging in their group.
18. In light of this feedback session the whole class set success criteria for the final draft with the objective of 'becoming an ambitious writer'.
19. Students completed final drafts in class (word-processed in an ICT suite) and completed them at home if needed.
20. The class took part in a 'celebration' in which all students either read their work aloud or opted for somebody else to read it. Peers commented on what was effective in each piece of writing.
21. A selection of students read their work in an assembly for Year 7 & 8 in front of staff and peers.
22. A selection of students' work will appear in the school magazine.

Rationale

Borgese highlights some common 'misconceptions' about the revision of writing in English classrooms which are termed 'barriers' to students' learning. My rationale for using the process approach included a desire to move away from these common misconceptions and towards a more successful, creative, open-minded and individualised approach to the teaching of writing. I aimed to take each student's personal experience as the basis of their development as writers. John Keen's overview of the key features of the process approach to teaching writing provided a useful starting point (see below).

"Some key features of process approaches to teaching writing are:

1. Process writing schemes of learning try as far as possible to start with and to follow the development of students' own experiences and ideas.
2. Prewriting can include a wide range of activities that enable students to draw on prior knowledge and experience.

3. In process schemes of learning an initial draft is treated as a first provisional attempt in which shortcomings, inconsistencies and infelicities are expected.
4. Revision of any aspect of the writing may follow reflection by the writer, perhaps drawing on discussion with or feedback from a teacher, classmates or others.
5. In process terms, revision is normally distinguished from editing and proofreading.
6. Celebrating students' writing regularly can help them to develop a nuanced sense of audience and feed back into their continued development as writers."

(<http://www.education.manchester.ac.uk/research/centres/lta/lta-research/pwp/>)

The first point is crucial to the process approach, "to start with and to *follow the development* of students' own experiences and ideas". Subsequent reflections on the scheme led me to consider that writing is much more meaningful and enjoyable for students when they are able to follow their own impetus for creativity. Indeed, it proved highly beneficial to discuss these natural urges and impulses to write; discussing 'why' we share experiences and 'why' individual students had chosen certain places provided students with a wider sense of writing for a particular purpose. Throughout the scheme the Year 8 students' growing confidence as writers became palpable.

The emphasis on students' own ideas and experiences was used as a means of opening up the possibilities of writing rather than creating the 'barriers' Borgese refers to, such as editing and mistake-spotting as the main thrust of the revision process. Developing ideas and communicating complex personal experience was instead the main aim of the project, while time for using editing skills (spelling, punctuation, correction, etc) was included within this broader, creative aim.

Borgese highlights the importance of increasing students' awareness of "the recursive and dynamic process of revision" (p.2). One significant idea is that "teachers are writers, as well as teachers of writing" (p.2). This is something I strive to bring to the classroom. Many students first consider the revision and redrafting process as stale and dull, as a process of correction rather than development. I felt that by sharing my own experiences as a writer this might help students to become more "recursive and dynamic" in their own revisions. As such, I began the scheme with my own version of a teacher 'model'. This was not in the form of a writing frame or a prescriptive overview instead I chose to talk openly about one of my personal experiences, a trip to Venice. This trip was also the topic of a piece of writing I completed aged 16. In choosing this 'special place' I was also reflecting on my own experiences as an adolescent writer (and later, a university student of creative writing before becoming a teacher of writing). Considering how personal this writing process had been to me, I felt it was important to maintain a highly individualised approach to the teaching of writing with my Year 8 students. Therefore, much of the pre-writing stage focused upon creating an atmosphere in which students felt confident about sharing their life experiences.

This initial pre-writing activity was part of what Borgese terms 'frontloading'. Sharing my personal experience helped to create the sense of 'familiarity and ease' he refers to. This also fed into the drama activity in which students created freeze frames based on one group member's special place. The rationale for this activity included 'having students plan, rehearse and converse during the pre-writing stage'. As Keen outlines, these prewriting activities enable students to 'draw on prior knowledge and experience'.

The notion of 'frontloading' is important as it helps students to 'streamline their writing as well as their revision process' (p.2 Borgese). In order to better understand the writing process students discussed why people might want to share their experiences. The ideas were recorded by a Year 8 student during class discussion in the following list:

- So you can see what they have seen and because it's interesting
- Sharing ideas
- Recommend things
- Show your personality/ expressing yourself
- Entertainment
- To advertise
- To express negative or positive feelings
- Warn someone
- For attention
- Sharing knowledge
- To remember the past, to explain something , our special memories
- Giving an account
- Showing off
- Make you feel better
- Because you're excited

Keen summarises students' reasons for sharing experiences using the following categories:

- **Catharsis** (to express negative or positive feelings, make you feel better)
- **Audience Response** (for attention)
- **Audience Understanding** (sharing knowledge, to explain something)
- **Audience Empathy** (so you can see what they have seen)
- **Inner Necessity** (because you're excited, show your personality, expressing yourself, to remember the past, our special memories) etc.

In the actual discussion there seemed to be more of a focus on 'Catharsis' and 'Inner Necessity', as if writing is deeply connected to emotion, thought and memories. This may have been partly down to the topic, 'A Special Place' which might have already evoked an emotional response from students. There was also some sense of audience which was very varied at this point (to "warn someone", to "advertise", etc).

After this very successful pre-writing phase it was important to stress that the first draft was part of the writing process in which shortcomings are to be expected. At this point, a class discussion centred on the meaning of a 'first draft' proved interesting. Students' ideas about the 'first draft' are included in the following list:

- “mind vomit”
- The base of a wall
- “rough” paragraph
- A first go
- You can make mistakes
- The creative part
- A plan
- Something to build on and improve
- The main/important parts of a story which can develop
- Afterwards you can add connections, different words, etc
- Something to look back on
- Something to adapt

This discussion was important because students were able to make conceptual links between drafting and revising. Some students likened the creative writing workshop to a practical workshop, comparing a first written draft with the preliminary drawings for a design in Design and Technology. Allowing students the time and space to explore these ideas enabled them to consider writing as “a highly complex cognitive process”. (Borgese p.2). The final pieces suggest that students were able to internalize these discussions about writing and its links with emotion, memory and thought. Many students were able to express themselves and reflect on their past experiences with great success.

Throughout the revision process a series of interactive approaches were used. As well as encouraging students to read and reflect on their own writing, I also incorporated ample space for peer assessment and small group discussion as well as one-to-one student-teacher tutorials. The tutorials were fairly basic but remained a productive part of the writing process. All discussions took place during class time (when other students were occupied with their own writing) and my detailed oral feedback was used in conjunction with some much shorter written feedback I had given on the previous drafts.

My rationale for including tutorials in the process arose from the initial desire to personalise the students’ writing experience in order to encourage them to develop their own ideas in writing. Since the students’ work was so individual it required one-to-one attention. Graves outlined the importance of developing ‘voice’ in the drafting process, stating that implications for teachers include the need to “guide students to develop their voices” and “provide time for meaningful feedback” (Borgese p.2). Furthermore, Atwell stated that two of the underlying principles of the writers’ workshop are “writers need to know adults who write” and “writers need response” (p.4). Again, I reflected on my own experiences as a student of creative writing at the University of Manchester in which group sharing and individual tutorials with a lecturer were vital parts of the writing process. Indeed, it was this experience which most propelled me forward as a writer. I hoped that by creating this space for sharing, discussion and conference in my Year 8 classroom I would help each student to develop their own ideas and improve their writing in the revision process.

The peer assessment phase took place after the tutorial; the rationale for this was partly to enable students to get the most out of peer assessment after I had modelled oral feedback one to one. As Borgese states, "peer response helps students to become more independent revisers" (p.7), and the heightened sense of awareness and reflection created in the tutorials helped students to progress as both peer assessors and independent revisers. When reflecting on this lesson, I felt it was the most successful example of peer assessment from any Key Stage 3 Class I have taught. The reasons for this could include the amount of time and emphasis placed on the activity and the gradual build up, both of which encouraged space for deeper thinking and more productive discussion. Perhaps teachers are often too quick to throw students straight into writing – using the 'write/stop/swap' approach I know I am guilty of! There may be a space for this type of activity however more natural writing processes are much slower and more complex than that.

The peer assessment session was conducted in a mini workshop style, in which students read 2 or 3 examples of their peers' work, left a written comment on each and then discussed each piece as a small group. The discussion of the work in small groups rather than pairs added a more interactive element to the peer assessment which worked very well. I feel this helped to develop a "nuanced sense of audience" (Keen) because multiple opinions could be shared and evaluated. Furthermore, the whole class element tied the session together. Students fed back to the whole class on the 'strengths and areas for development' arising from their discussions. Many of these examples were similar and there was an overlap between strengths and areas for development, which was completely valid. For example, students said that one strength was the evidence of real emotion in the pieces, but the area for development could be using more emotive vocabulary or developing this sense of emotion, and so on. This exercise was the basis for setting success criteria and encouraging individual reflection and target setting for the final piece. In addition, the sense of community which was clearly evident at this stage laid the foundations for a pleasant and respectful 'celebration' phase at the end of the scheme, in which students enjoyed listening to (and commenting on) one another's work.

In conclusion, I was incredibly pleased with the students' achievements. The process was enjoyable, uplifting and an excellent learning curve. The main learning points for me as a teacher included;

- It is crucial to give time and space to pre-writing activities, discussion and exploration of students' ideas in order to allow them enough creative freedom to express themselves.
- Encouraging students to reflect on their lives and experiences feeds into their sense of themselves as writers.
- Sharing your own experiences as a writer and using them to inform your lesson planning is both enjoyable and helpful to students' development.
- Being completely open-minded and resisting the urge to give too much input, modelling and so on pays off, especially if you focus instead on each student's writing as an individual piece.

- Tutorials and peer assessment are an excellent way of encouraging students to revise the whole piece of writing, rather than focus on minute changes (the occasional spelling error etc). Instead the focus is on students' development of ideas, voice, nuance of meaning etc, all of which helps to improve punctuation, vocabulary and proof-reading skills.
- An explorative approach enables you to show an interest in each student as a writer which helps to build confidence and develop relationships.

Overall, the scheme has led me to consider the complexity and highly personal experience of writing as a reflective process of revision. I felt that the process approach was much better suited to this type of creative writing and the students produced excellent, original accounts of their 'special place' which were entirely personal to them.

Rachael Clarke at Alderley Edge School for Girls