

FIRST STORY

The Practice of Experienced First Story Writers-in-Residence

by Pat Cochrane, August 2017

*'The magic moment when the noise drops away and they are all writing,
Oreos, Jaffa Cakes and easy-peel clementines...'*



Background

First Story is a charity which works to help young people find their voices and develop them as creative writers. Its vision is clear:

We believe that writing can transform lives, and that there is dignity and power in every young person's story.

First Story brings talented, professional writers into secondary schools serving low-income communities to work with teachers and students to foster creativity and communication skills.

By helping students find their voices, through intensive, fun programmes, First Story raises aspirations and gives students the skills and confidence to achieve them.

First Story arranges and pays for acclaimed writers to run creative-writing workshops for students in state schools across the country. Over the course of an academic year, each writer-in-residence leads weekly, after-school workshops for a group of up to twenty-one students. We publish the students' writings in a **professionally produced anthology** for each school, and the schools host book-launch events at which the students read their stories to their peers, friends, families and teachers.

We focus on schools in which more than 50% of pupils are considered deprived according to the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index, and/or GCSE results fall in the lowest third of the national distribution.

Over the past few years First Story has grown considerably and now works in many areas across England including the East Midlands, London, Yorkshire and the Humber, and the South West.

The Commission

First Story is facing the challenge of scaling up the initiative, working in more schools and with more writer facilitators. The charity is keen to develop a deeper understanding of the approach that their experienced writers adopt, to see if there are commonalities and/or principles which could inform their recruitment and training of new writers as well as supporting experienced writers. CapeUK (now known as IVE) was commissioned to carry out this enquiry.



Research Process

This was a small-scale research project, with a limited budget, and so a simple process was developed, involving:

- A brief scan of current, relevant research in the field.
- Two exploratory seminars, with eight experienced First Story writers – taking place at the outset and the mid-point of the process.
- Observation of the writers and their current groups in eight schools.
- Participant writers keeping a reflective log.

A brief literature review scanned some of the recent pertinent reports on writers and creative practitioners in schools. These reports included Sue Horner's *Magic Dust that Lasts* (2010) and Maurice Galton's *Creative Practitioners in Schools and Classrooms – Final Report of the Project: The Pedagogy of Creative Practitioners in Schools* (2008).

The Arvon Foundation's large-scale research project, *Teachers as Writers*, was running at the same time as this First Story research and so, although not available at the early stage of this project, it was possible to refer to the interim findings in a recently published executive summary.

The First Story team identified eight of their experienced writers who were leading First Story writing groups in schools in the 2016-17 academic year. The writers were selected in order to include those with a range of specialisms and included novelists, short-story writers, non-fiction writers, and performance poets. The schools were selected to include a range of different contexts, including one Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). Four were based in London and four located elsewhere in England – Cheltenham, Bradford, Leeds and Skegness.

I planned to have an initial exploratory workshop with all eight writers, and each group was to be visited twice over the research process, during which I would act as a participant observer. Each writer was asked to keep a reflective log to record reflections during their residency. Brief guidance notes encouraged them to keep notes of their plan alongside reflection after each session (see appendix one). They were also invited to identify two of the young people in their group to focus on their response to the sessions and progress and development over the residency. A brief report was to be circulated part way through the process, sharing emerging insights and questions with the writers, and then a final workshop was to give the participating writers an opportunity to comment on the findings.

As it was not possible to identify a date when all writers would be available for the initial briefing/reflection session, so three separate sessions were held – two in London and one in Leeds. All the writers were visited twice, with one exception where it was not possible to arrange a second visit for logistical reasons. One writer was visited three times and an additional visit to a PRU, which had not been scoped into the original research, was arranged. Wherever possible I had a brief discussion with the writer and the teacher at the end of the session. I was also able to have follow-up conversations with a number of the writers away from the sessions. All the groups (except for the short programme, where both visits took place in the Spring term) were visited once in the Autumn term and once in the Spring term. This was to experience and capture the different phases in the process – establishing the purpose as a writing group different from school, introducing the writer and opening up the process, moving on

to more challenging exercises and beginning to see oneself as a writer, learning to critique one's own and each other's writing, editing, producing, and finally presenting the anthology.

I joined the annual writers' briefing and sharing event in London and observed several CPD workshops.

By observing the practice of a number of First Story's most experienced writers, I was seeking to identify approaches which seemed to be particularly effective and successful in enthusing and supporting the young writers to develop their craft. I was not seeking to gather a portfolio of workshop exercises or 'top tips' as these are already available to First Story, but rather to identify what the deeper thought processes are in each writer's approach – whether there is an implicit set of principles they draw on to inform the judgements they were making in planning and shaping their sessions; how they planned for the arc of development afforded by sixteen sessions; what processes they used in supporting the young people's learning to enable progression and development and what informs the choices they make in responding to and critiquing young people's work.

I was seeking to identify the underlying deeper principles that drove each writer's approach with their group and to see where there were common features that seemed to lead to success.

I was also interested in exploring how the process was different from an accumulation of sixteen separate workshops with a range of stimulating activities and whether the writers were able to offer a deeper developmental process which consciously scaffolds the young writers' learning progression.

My visits and conversations provided rich data about the First Story work, but inevitably, given the limited time, I was only able to capture snapshots, and so, although I include examples here, I am very aware that there is a wealth of practice that I did not see or did not see in sufficient depth to write about in this report. This report therefore draws on observational notes, writer interviews and group discussions, and writer's logs.

I am extremely grateful for the generosity of all the writers I worked with, including Dan Powell, Francesca Beard, Roland Chambers, Anthony Cartwright, Rachel Connor, Peter Hobbs, Jane Bailey, Andy Craven-Griffiths, and the First Story team – Mónica Parle and Emily Webb – all of whom were



enthusiastic and supportive of the enquiry. I would also like to thank the teachers, staff and pupils in the eight participating schools: Abbey Manor College, Brigshaw High School, All Saints' Academy Cheltenham, Dixons Allerton Academy, Wembley High Technology College, Pimlico Academy, St Gabriel's College and Skegness Academy.

The process

Visiting the sessions was a remarkable privilege. It was a pleasure to see the young writers developing and sharing their writing. Even when the writers were working with challenging groups, I saw examples of very powerful breakthroughs, where a reluctant young person finally shared their work by reading out loud or where a particularly effective piece of writing left the group silent with admiration. I was invited to take part in the writing exercises and share my writing in most of the sessions. I experienced immersion in the activities the writers used to generate creative writing; the struggle to get the right words on the page, the joy when the words flowed, when a character developed or the beginnings of an insight or story emerged, as well as the tentative embarrassment at first sharing my writing. All the writers and groups were welcoming and I draw on all of those diverse experiences in this report.

Getting under the skin of the First Story process took a while. Although it is a simple model, there are additional elements and variations that stimulate the process: the First Story Writers' Festival for pupils in Oxford, the regular competitions, the regional events and links with local universities, the partnership with other initiatives such as the Cheltenham Literature Festival, and the briefing for writers at the beginning of the year. These were all part of the background to the research, but were not captured in the process. As with all research, it would have been beneficial to have had more time to allow for further in-depth exploration.

The schools and the selection process of pupils

The schools involved were all very different in culture and ethos. All placed emphasis on attainment. However, some were more focused on academic attainment through a highly structured approach, whereas others appeared to place more emphasis on stimulating the imagination and curiosity of its pupils. Several were located in new-build PFI schools; another was working in slightly cramped temporary accommodation.

Many of the sessions were held in the English subject rooms, some of which had stimulating creative images on the walls, while many also had lists and explanations of the grammatical rules, terms or figures of speech that pupils now have to be aware of. One such list included, in no apparent logical order: *syndetic list, hyperbole, assonance, antithesis, personification, simile, adverb, asyndetic list, metaphor, adjective, very, enjambment, oxymoron, foreshadowing, protagonist, juxtaposition, pronoun, repetition, caesura*, each accompanied by a brief definition (Observation notes).

This list of rather random out-of-context technical terms presented a stark visual backdrop demonstrating the difference between First Story ways of working and the response of some English teachers to the constraints of the secondary curriculum.

School ethos and context affected the learning climate in which the writers were working but perhaps more important for the climate of the group was the way in which young people were recruited and the composition of the group. In one school, it was a competitive process: pupils had to apply to be part of the programme and were selected on the basis of potential and ability. In one school only pupils who were identified as in receipt of pupil premium were able to take part. In another school the writer thought that out of school opportunities were targeted at pupils who had been identified as being challenging, and felt the school was therefore rewarding bad behaviour. One writer told of a school which recruited by giving out 'golden tickets' with the teacher telling pupils, 'you have to come to this,

you're the coolest kids in school.' As a result, the writers were working with groups with different levels of ability and motivation.

In all the schools, with one exception, a new cohort was recruited each year. In one school several pupils had attended over a number of years and one group member had left the school but returned as a volunteer both to take part in the sessions, but also to take on a mentoring role. In most schools observed, the group included young people from several year groups.



The identity of the writer and demystifying the craft of writing

'I am a writer and I cannot teach you to write. I can give you space and permission to start a writing process.'

(Interview notes)

All the writers introduced themselves and their work as a writer or performance poet at the beginning of the residency to set the context. The relationship between the writer and the young people was established as one between fellow writers, with the experienced writer sharing the craft with the new writers, but seeking to establish a respectful and collaborative working relationship. Sharing their personal experience of the craft and process of writing infused all the sessions.

'I talk a lot about being a writer.'

'It's a craft – it's a learnable thing.'

(Interview notes)

One writer spoke about how valuable he thought it was that the young people had seen him perform as a poet at the Oxford First Story Young Writers' Festival before they started the group in school and introduced himself at the beginning of the residency through reading 'a poem or two'. Another starts off the residency by showing the work on his website and talks about his career as a writer.

One writer, who had also been a teacher, was less overt about sharing his writing background initially.

'I try to come to it relatively obliquely, talk quite a bit about whatever it is I write and more [about my background] towards when we publish the anthology.'

(Interview notes)

All the writers used the quiet writing time to join in the writing process, modelling the necessary reflection and focus.

'I join in the writing. It's important for them to see you do it and to see what's not polished and edited. It's about getting it down on the page.'

(Interview notes)

One prose writer chose to explore poetry a lot, as this was a form in which he was less confident. He felt it '*levelled the playing field*' and he could join in as a learner, sharing his creative process and experimentation. He tells the young writers,

'Doing this I feel exactly the same as you do.'

(Interview notes)

Another shared his own efforts to write in dialect when one young writer chose to capture the Midlands accent on the page.

Three of the writers in the programme had been teachers – two were former English teachers and one had been a modern languages teacher. It was interesting to probe how they felt their role as a First Story writer differed from being a teacher.

One former English teacher and Head of Department described feeling 'a bit fraudulent' when he first started working as a writer in schools; he felt conscious that teachers he worked with might feel that he was doing things that they themselves could have done. But, he felt an important difference came in his experience at the editing stage, and his ability to share insights about his creative process 'trying to be explicit about where creativity comes from, trying to work away from "things just happen like that", which is a very common conception' (Interview notes). This combination of experienced and sophisticated teaching skills with writer's perceptions was a powerful mix.

The former modern languages teacher felt that her approach to teaching a language was very different from the First Story writer's role.

'I was a Modern Languages teacher, so it was always important to make the lessons as "pupil-centred" as possible because, although I was a major resource (speaking the language in question), it was crucial that they practised it as much as possible, whether in pairs, in groups or one to one with me.'

The big difference is that I am not giving out all the time. I am not the resource. They are. What comes out of these workshops comes from them, from inside their heads, from their own experiences and ideas. When it works, it is because I have managed to trigger something.'

(Writer's log)

When a number of the teachers on the programme were questioned about their perceptions of the difference between their approach to teaching English and the writer's approach, they all referred to the constraints of the curriculum. But all the teachers also felt that they had been influenced by their collaboration with the writers and the First Story context and aims; they described how they could see the benefits of encouraging free writing and imaginative approaches.



Writers' high expectations

Each of the writers conveyed an absolute conviction that the members of the group would be able to achieve 'good' writing by being supported in a space conducive to writing. They demonstrated a passionate belief in the young people's ability and the power of the process of the imagination when it is freed up.

'I have a really positive feeling about this group.' (Writer's log)

'I believed in them and believed something powerful would come out of them.' (Interview notes)

'Right from the first, especially with disengaged boys, I go in and expect lots from them. I don't go in expecting little of them.' (Interview notes)

'Remember to be patient. They're all there and writing and enjoying. It's a process. Just my expectations are so high. It often takes a long time to click – maybe all year.' (Writer's log)

Such high expectations are consistent with Horner's (2010) findings on writers in schools.

Writers' resilience and response to adversity

All of the writers observed seemed able to maintain this positivity even when faced with the challenges and changing circumstances of life in a school.

'I am determined to be positive.' (Writer's log)

On several occasions, I met the writer before the session, talked through the plan for the session and observed them having to deal with change. One writer had planned an activity for a group of sixteen, assuming it would be possible to build on the previous week's activity and a certain level of group energy. When only six came, because of a clashing school event, (rehearsal for a school play or trip) it was understandably disappointing and led to a change in dynamics. As not all of those six had been at the previous session the activity had to be amended at the last moment. But, he quickly skipped into a new beat.

One writer's log captured the reality of this frustration but also how it quickly turned around:

'Hugely disappointed at the beginning – several of the class missing (possibly a clash with art exam? We don't know) and one student has failed to bring his book back from Christmas holiday despite reminders, when lots of things we're doing now use our old work. It's the business end of the programme and we need everyone present and writing and getting stuff ready for the anthology. I was annoyed and a bit thrown (and a bit hassled after a slow journey up through the wet and cold, train always halting).

However, once we got going everything went great.'

(Writer's log)

In interview, another saw this response to adversity as modelling the risk taking and resilience that was necessary in a writer:

'Part of being a writer is problem solving, being reactive or flexible, modelling an intent/a life. Writing isn't this abstract academic thing. At some level it is a struggle. There's an aspect of bravery and risk to it; it would be completely unacceptable to me to turn up and say, "oh no this isn't what we agreed". It's in a way modelling problem solving.'

(Interview notes)

Writer-teacher relationship

All the writers felt that it was critical to develop a positive working relationship with the link teacher and were sympathetic and sensitive to the demands teachers face. Ideally, they wanted them to join in and take part in the writing process themselves. In most cases this was possible and there was a very positive dynamic between the teacher and the writer.

Although the teacher often set the scene at the beginning of the session with some logistics, such as how to enter the latest First Story competition, they could then smoothly switch to being a member of the group as a fellow writer. In many of the schools the partner teacher attended and participated as a full member of the group (in one school two teachers regularly attended) grasping it as an opportunity to work alongside the pupils, joining in with the tasks and sharing their writing. But, in one of the schools visited, a different teacher attended each week in the second term and in another, the writer spoke of some lack of continuity with several different teachers joining the group over the sixteen weeks.

The teacher participating as writer and sharing their writing contributed to the democratic nature of the process where all were learning and experimenting together, and also modelled an element of personal disclosure not common in the classroom. For example, in one case the teacher shared some very powerful personal writing about the loss of her mother which left the group silent with respect. In another, the teacher wrote a lively and warm narrative about applying to be the First Story writer, which drew on her enjoyment of working with that writer over the year.

In the few cases where behaviour was an issue, the teacher took on a disciplinarian role either at the request of the writer, 'Called on V at one point to help quieten them' (Writer's log) or because they saw it was necessary. Where this was a gentle nudge, it didn't divert too much from the writing climate, but in one case it veered into authoritarian mode, switching the atmosphere, for a moment, from collaborative writing group to directive lesson.

One of the First Story writers talked of having to gently steer a teacher away from taking over the group as a class. This illustrates the difference between the freedom and self-direction the writer seeks to encourage to the compliance required in some teaching. A snapshot moment, observed in a PRU, demonstrated the difference between the two modes, when a teaching assistant changed the atmosphere with one group member by bustling into a 'get on with it' directive-teaching mode, at the point when the writer was encouraging an imaginative free write.

The First Story experience didn't always engage all the pupils; in one school the group only gelled when a number of particularly disruptive and attention-seeking members were asked by the teacher to either fully join in or to stop coming. The writer describes how, after they left,

'(...) the rest of the group just blossomed, they were able to be themselves and [be] quite quirky.'

(Writer interview)

Other staff members also engaged with the First Story groups, including learning mentors, librarians and study support staff. In one school the link person was a librarian with a remit for study support and reading who was very pro-active in following up with the group between sessions, and in another, the writer felt the librarian was very helpful in setting the climate for the group.

In summary, although most of the writers were able to work in close and fruitful collaboration with teachers and other staff (and this is what they all aspired to), in a small number of cases this was not possible, largely because of organisational issues and pressure of work on teachers.

The sixteen-week cycle

All of the writers involved in the research process were experienced facilitators with considerable experience of running creative-writing workshops for young people in schools or in an HE context. Each could therefore draw on a large repertoire of approaches and techniques. But, they were very aware of the difference between what they offered in a one-off workshop, where you had to be ‘a bit flashier’ and ‘make an impression and impact in a short time’, and the longer slow-burn process afforded by the sixteen-week First Story model.

The sixteen-week cycle is not just an accumulation of one-off workshops. It allows for a sense of personal challenge, growth and depth which emerges from the developing relationships and the writer’s growing awareness of the strengths and tendencies of each of the young writers in their groups. It is how the experienced writer-facilitator navigates this opportunity and what judgements they make to guide the development of the young people’s writing skill which is of particular interest.

Throughout the sessions the writers were making fine judgements about how to establish a climate for writing and how to nurture the young writers’ progress. The focused periods of writing which emerged in all of the groups seemed to flow best when the writer had established a balance between feeling safe and taking a risk; a playful participatory and informal environment and a space for focused individual writing; encouragement and critique; opening up personal responses and empathy and insights into the lives of others.

‘Need to pay attention to the balance between fun and getting some writing done. Don’t let them lose too much focus. Might just need to allow for time for the exercises to happen over, so when the magic moment comes they all have time to write. Or short, fun exercise first, but that often sets a precedent, so maybe long exercise first then fun one... Anyway, cut down on amount getting through now one competition is out of the way. More time to write and more time to listen to pieces.’

(Writer’s log)

In most schools, the first eight weeks was a gradual opening up and confidence building process, with a greater focus on editing and working towards the final publication in term two.

In term one, sessions typically began with a gentle warm up which was followed by more challenging, and stretching activity – often accompanied by sharing of biscuits or fruit brought in by the teacher, the writer or, in one case, by the young people. All the writers then encouraged the young writers to read out and to critique each other’s work. This predictable and familiar structure seemed to provide a framework within which risk and experimentation could be nurtured.

Some writers continued to follow a similar pattern in sessions in the second term, feeling it was important to maintain as much time as possible for the imaginative writing process, whereas others moved more into structured editing work earlier in the second term.

The pattern within each session

Many of the writers established a routine or rhythm of working within the sessions, which some described as modelling habits to prepare for writing.

The warm-up or transition phase

Sessions often began with playful, non-threatening warm-up activities – in some cases physical drama-influenced activities, word games, word association or free writing, which was ‘safe’ as it was not to be shared. One writer described this stage of the session as a form of ritual:

‘It creates a kind of sacred space, I feel – that’s how I think of it. I kind of make a joke of that with the writers. It’s quite hippy, a devotion to self-love, it’s ridiculous. Make it so that we can laugh at it.’

(Interview notes)

Each of the writers chose to do this in a way that was authentic to them. So, for some, in the smaller groups, it was simply about establishing the climate by being more conversational and dialogic.

This introduction to the sessions acted in two ways: firstly, it aimed to establish a climate which was different in style and aims to the classroom; a climate of the writers group, and secondly to provide a safe non-threatening phase; a playful but purposeful atmosphere.

This warm-up phase seemed to be most effective when the activity was not too challenging and when the young people could respond easily and quickly – the easier and more affirming the activity, the more effective it seemed to be in opening up to the next step.

Scaffolding – warm-up as a stepping stone

In some of the most successful examples, the opening activity provided materials which acted as a stepping stone to the more stretching activities. So, for example, in one session, the young writers were invited simply to ‘free write’ about a visit to a museum they had made the previous week, being encouraged to think about senses – touch, smell, taste. They then selected their three favourite words and phrases, wrote each on a Post-it and placed them on a table. These became a collective resource for others to choose from and weave into a longer, more complex writing exercise.

Giving permission

In some schools, the young writers appeared initially to find the freedom offered by the creative writing process bewildering. They needed affirmation that the choice about what and how to write lay with them. They also sought confirmation about how to carry out a task,

‘Do you want us to do it this way miss?’

(Observation notes)

The First Story writers needed to be explicit about giving permission to the young writers to make their own choices and to use their imaginations.

One writer asked the young people to think about their parents’ lives before they were born. They found this remarkably difficult. The writer had to give them permission to make it up:

Pupil: (stuck and struggling to think of what to write) ‘I don’t know nothing.’

Writer: ‘You know nothing about your mum? What she longed for? Maybe she liked eating certain things? You can make them up...’

(Observation notes)

Even late in the residency, some of the young writers were still needing this permission to be confirmed. When faced with the task of choosing a person and writing a letter of application to be that

person for the day, one of the most withdrawn and tentative pupils asked what was right and was told, 'It's what YOU want to do'. (Observation notes)



Place – a writing space

All of the writers recognised the importance of creating a learning environment which felt different from school and tried really hard to arrange this with the school:

'I made the point that I thought it was important to have a "special" place for the workshops so that the pupils felt it was different from school...'

'I have emailed the head of English (...) about the importance of a special place for these students. After all, they are staying behind voluntarily and they do the school proud with their publication.'

(Writer's log)

But it wasn't always forthcoming:

'I arrived at the new venue (the teachers' area for English and Maths – a large oval table in a walkway between classrooms). The table is covered with half-finished snacks, mugs of coffee and books. I try to clear up as best I can.'

(Writer's log)

Those that were working in a classroom all re-arranged the room creating a circle of tables to help dialogue and collaboration and in some cases a space for movement.

The most important thing was establishing a good climate for writing:

'XXX informally moves around the room, eating biscuits, discretely encouraging one of the young writers who has taken most of the session to relax, warm up. He throws a packet of biscuits for pupil to catch, feels like informal, kind control. He calms the group down subtly. Serious, purposeful atmosphere. Silence falls, writing starts.'

(Observation notes)

Place – another space

Several of the writers took the group outdoors for stimulus. One session observed was relocated to a bandstand in the park opposite the school. This was a natural circular space for drama-based warm up and playful exercises and a change of energy from sitting at a desk. The nearby park benches then offered informal space for quiet writing.

Place – space for empathy

Another writer took the group to a medical museum which gave rich contextual data about children's living conditions and life expectancy in Victorian England. On entering the reconstructed 19th century streets, each visitor is given a character to follow through and, as they move through the exhibit, they reflect on their chances of survival at each stage of life. This was used the following week to stimulate empathic historical writing.

One writer's log takes us through the process she used to enable the young writers to think themselves into another character. In this case it was seeing things from an old person's perspective – being over eighty. She reads text from published authors as a stimulus and, after initial fear that the young people simply couldn't make the imaginative step from being a teenager to being eighty, they produced some powerful work.

Place – outside in

Bringing slightly quirky stimulus material into the room also created the sense of another space. One writer brought a bag of random footwear into the room – a glittery sandal, a muddy boot, a trainer. These were passed round for everyone to choose a shoe. Once the young writers had got over the laughter generated by wondering where the shoes had been and how hygienic they were, it generated some great imaginative writing.

Similarly, a model of a ship's cat, a crumpled piece of paper and a bunch of carrots with their leaves still covered in a bit of mud generated some imaginative writing on the theme of love.

Place – confronting realities

One writer used film very effectively as a way of bringing in experience from the outside world and acknowledging some of the dilemmas, grievances and challenges the young people faced in their lives.

As the context was a PRU all the young people had had fractured experiences of either school or home life and for many, both. The material was carefully selected to open up discussion about prejudice and experiences they may have had about people stereotyping them as young people or young black people, 'dealing with stuff that's really live for them'. (Interview notes)

The first YouTube clip, *Little Things Are Big* by Jesús Colón, describes Colón's dilemma 'as a negro and a Puerto Rican' late at night on the New York subway in the 50s, about whether to offer help to a 'white lady, three children and a suitcase', or whether she would be scared by him approaching her to offer help. He chose to walk away but then on reflection realised that this choice diminished his humanity. In another clip, a young black performance poet, Indigo Williams, presented a powerful poem at a TED event about her experience of racism and stereotyping.

Obama's eulogy to the pastor who was killed in the Charleston shooting alongside eight other people, including children, was used to open up understanding of rhetoric. Although a hand-out listing a range of rhetorical tools was too complex for the group to absorb, they responded to the power of Obama's skill as an orator and went on to apply some of the approaches in their writing. As regular church attenders, several of the group had grown up with the oratory of black led churches and entered into a confident conversation about the style.

Technology – new and old

Secondary schools now have extensive IT resources and some groups were able to use this effectively to enhance the First Story process.

The most obvious use is during the editing process. In some schools, young people were able to type up their own material at home and save it in the school shared drive or on Google Docs, so that the writer could access them between sessions. In other schools the process involved the writer taking away the handwritten drafts, typing them up and returning them with comments the following week. Although the latter process enabled the First Story writer to immerse themselves in the text it was quite labour intensive.

In several schools, IT rooms were made available for the final editing phase, but they are often laid out like an old typing pool and not a conducive space for discussion and collaboration.

Only one of the writers observed made use of the interactive white board to show stimulus film material. This was possibly because others were reluctant to engage with the bureaucracy of accessing the equipment, and as a former teacher he was confident and familiar with the technology. (There is nothing worse than the technology failing and losing time and energy in a workshop.) However, few writers made use of the old technology either! An exception was one writer using the whiteboard to demonstrate his own editing process when writing a complex poem. Another used the blackboard to write up a key principle of writing for the young writers to refer back to during their writing.

There is certainly scope for making more use of available technology, but it depends entirely on school staff and smooth access to systems.

The craft of writing

Re-enforcing principles

All the writers regularly re-enforced what they felt led to 'good writing', and had different ways of doing this. Some would regularly refer to a small number of principles:

- Show not tell

- Be authentic and true to yourself
- Concentrate on detail and use the senses
- Develop a radar for clichés

These were not presented as a formulaic set of rules, but rather principles to consider and refer to.

Another spoke of developing ‘basic building blocks of character, plot, point of view, tense, particular voice’. The young people were told, ‘If you are showing off you are not writing. Say something useful and interesting.’ (Observation notes)

Guidance was woven into the sessions in different ways. One writer said that he would work principles into his response to participants’ writing rather than refer to them in the abstract. He felt that this feedback would enable the young people to gradually develop an understanding of what made good writing. Another gently introduced principles during the sessions; tips such as avoiding tautologies and carefully selecting words, ‘keep to the theme of the precise word count’ (Observation notes).



Several of the writers used texts as a stimulus to model a principle. *I Remember* by Joe Brainard, for example, was used as an example of the impact of very specific descriptions. This was then used to help them think about very specific memories from their childhood with the writer also modelling examples from her childhood such as her grandmother always bringing a Fry’s Chocolate Cream Bar when she visited. The Brainard poem also gave an easy-to-copy format to capture rich memories from their lives.

Several of the writers included these principles as implicit in their instructions for a writing exercise, asking the young writers to concentrate on,

'...sense, smell feel, colours shapes, voices'

or to,

'write as if you were there – sight, sound, smell, load of snapshot sensations, physical sensations, texture, touch, temperature.'

(Observation notes)

Ruthlessly cutting flowery lists of adjectives and selecting only the most powerful description was also woven into guidance and feedback.

And all tried to steer the young writers away from 'melodrama' and 'bad rhymes' and towards writing about what they know,

'The ordinary details there are more interesting than the melodrama.'

'They can be very ordinary. They don't have to be extraordinary.'

(Observation notes)

And another said that,

'They do quickly understand that high fallutin' metaphysics doesn't move.'

(Interview notes)

One writer spoke of trying to respond to the process rather than the outcome. He was aware of Dweck's research on growth mind-set and so was aware of the importance of encouraging the young people to stretch themselves; experience something risky and work through failure.

Introducing figures of speech

None of the writers started a session by stating a learning objective such as use of metaphor or simile (although introduction to poetic forms was an exception to this).

'I would never start by saying for example "we are going to do something on metaphor".'

(Interview notes)

Focus on a particular technique tended to be through using and exploring it first and then sharing the grammatical term where it seemed helpful. So, for example, the young people would immerse themselves in writing which encouraged use of metaphor, possibly modelled on this use in some published writing, and only after they had used it in their own writing would it be named as a metaphor. Otherwise it 'takes the life and colour out of things'.

But the writers would not shy away from using complex technical or grammatical terms and some peppered their talk with an assumption that the young people would understand the terms, 'there's a

kind of writing called imagism'. They did not feel compelled to go into detailed explanation of each term. Instead, the relaxed use of such vocabulary reinforced the feeling of writer-to-writer dialogue.

Teaching forms and wordplay

Only one of the sessions observed encouraged the young people to experiment and play with word choice in a structured way; this could be because only two of the seventeen sessions observed were specifically about teaching poetry. The writer modelled spontaneous haiku writing on the board on the story of *Little Red Riding Hood*, showing how he counts the syllables and how he edits his first draft.

In another exercise, he introduced the idea of creating portmanteau words where the young people were asked to think of two completely different words and then merge them to create a new word. After quite a lot of prompting, they dreamt up some great words and meanings; 'googulp' – when you drink in information. 'Gorillegitimate' – an ape which does not exist.

He also modelled on the board his process of collecting words that rhymed for a limerick and his process of cutting back redundant words or selecting between words to fit a particular poetic form. It was not clear during the session whether the young people were fully engaged with this, but the work produced was high quality and apparently won First Story awards.

Another writer describes in her writer's log how she uses play with words to free up their imaginations and make unexpected connections. The following is an edited extract from the log:

'Start with four pieces of paper each. On one, they write an abstract noun (we discuss what that is), on another a concrete noun (discuss), on the third, a simple dictionary definition of the abstract noun, on the fourth a definition of the concrete noun.

One student then reads out each abstract noun in turn, and another pupil reads out a definition of a concrete noun, at random. So we have funny results, some surreal, some quite plausible e.g. "sorrow is... something you lie on all night", "love is... a root vegetable".

We follow with "The Furniture Game", which I explain by getting them to choose a "big" personality to start with. Donald Trump is our man, and I ask them to write down what he would be if he was an item of furniture, a musical instrument, a song, a meal, an animal etc. They then volunteer their answers and say why they have chosen the items they have. We compose a joint poem from the different answers.

They were then asked to make up their own comparisons, using "you and I" or "he and she".

At this point I handed out lots of Jaffa Cakes and (healthy option) easy-peeler clementines to sustain their creativity!

They mostly wrote poems. I was thrilled with them. All but one girl read out.

He is a soft chair, so much support,

She is a stool with nothing to fall back on.'

(Writer's log)

Scaffolding

As in the previous extract, many of the writers designed the sessions to allow for a simpler writing activity to then lead onto a more complex writing task which may involve shifting perspective, going deeper into character or motivation.

So, for example, in one session,

'Everyone was invited to think of an animal, to describe it, what they liked about it and why they chose it. Everybody goes with the exercise. The choices included, elephant, snake, locust, panda, eagle, fox, ermine. Each student then reads out and the writer comments on each. This is a slow, relaxed, fun process and everyone is interested to hear the choices we have each made.'

The writer's feedback is positive and affirming:

'Love it, wonderful, good stuff.'

(Observation notes)

The subsequent task was to imagine the creature as a human with the qualities of the creature transformed and make a diary entry for its first day at school:

'This led to fifteen minutes of complete silence and focused writing. The session really does have the atmosphere of a writing club.'

None of the detail is superfluous. I've the description of home being like a nest. A really serious and detailed investigation.'

(Observation notes)

Another route into character was through choosing an object and gradually building up a sense of character. In one group, the young people selected an object from a bag full of random objects. They were initially asked to think what it looks like, smells like, feels like and quickly free write.

They were then asked to think who might own the objects and do a quick pre-writing exercise – who are you, where are you, what do you most want in the world?

The task is to write in the voice of the character, the story of what you want, why you can't get what you want and to try to include the object in the story.

Reading out

All the writers felt that it was important for everyone to read out their work not as a performance, but more as a way of sharing the work and taking the first steps in owning and critiquing their writing:

'Reading out is not part of the writing process, but it's very much part of teaching.'

(Interview notes)

As the weeks progressed, this became easier for the young people, and the writers' logs capture their moments of joy when a previously reluctant young writer finally finds the courage to read out.

In some groups, the participants were happy to read out from the very beginning, but in most groups there was considerable diffidence and the young writers needed lots of encouragement:

'It's just like being on a high dive board. It gets harder and harder the longer you put it off.'

(Observation notes)

Writers took different approaches to this; in larger groups, they tended to look for volunteers, as everyone reading out would have taken too much of the group time; however, they would try to make sure that over the weeks everyone was encouraged to read.



One writer banned negative introductions and introduced a rule that before reading out, each young writer had to say something that they liked about what they had written.

It's a delicate balance for writers to handle as they want everyone to participate, but where young people refused to read out, forcing them to do so or exploring at length the importance of reading out can become problematic and take energy from the rest of the group:

'At first I try not to push it too much. I would be quite tentative about the reading out. I ask them to add or pass. That seems to work all right to get things going if you know you can say no, although there is then a risk that certain voices dominate.'

(Interview notes)

Feedback

The quality and nature of the feedback which the writers gave to the young writers was perhaps one of the most significant elements of the process. Feedback is a vital part of the learning process and has been identified as a significant factor in supporting learning.¹ Critiquing one's own work is an inherent element of all artistic development. But, giving genuine feedback and critique is a sophisticated skill which depends on a number of things: the aim of the writing and its audience, the aim of the feedback, the context in which the feedback is given and the skill and understanding of the person giving the feedback. The writers all adapted their feedback to the different phases of the residency and their assessment of the needs of the individuals at a particular stage in their development.

Feedback to readings in the group

All the First Story writers felt that giving positive encouraging feedback was important but many mentioned the importance of being authentic rather than generally supportive.

'Authenticity is important...'

'Sometimes I find it really hard. I just sort of let it go when somebody writes something a bit blah.'

'It's better not to pretend. They pick it up. They hate dishonesty.'

'They know when you're not being genuine.'

'Try to be really genuine and honest. If you're not honest it doesn't help anyone.' (Interview notes)

The First Story writers all listened carefully to the young people reading out their work and were able to pick out very specific aspects of the writing which they liked, thought were powerful or interesting in some way, or thought could be developed further. The feedback was often framed as from one writer to another, 'writerly' and appreciative: 'I wish I'd thought of that.'

This required immense concentration as the young writers were often nervous or diffident and so read quietly or very quickly. Sometimes the most effective feedback was group silence, as in one group where the task was to describe yourself in six words:

'I'm firmly against the death penalty.' (Followed by huge respectful silence.) *'Essentially it's everyone else's fault.'*

(Observation notes)

I pursued this line of thinking with a couple of the writers, asking how they managed to identify a response to each piece of work. They reported that it was sometimes difficult to be specific but it was something they tried very hard to do:

'It's usually what I'm genuinely enthusiastic about in their work. A line they use, powerful and interesting in some way. I genuinely respond to the thing I liked. Modelling critique.' (Interview notes)

¹ See <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/resources/teaching-learning-toolkit>.

The writers saw giving and receiving feedback in response to the reading as laying the ground for editing.

Sometimes the writer repeated back a particular line or phrase:

“Dull but massive child’s vision” – I love it.’

‘A diary form is a really good way of doing it. Nice mix of descriptive. “Boredom seeps through the cracks on the walls.”’

(Observation notes)

Or, has a personal response that shows that they have related to the piece on a personal level – ‘that reminded me of a Leonardo cartoon.’ ‘That is beautiful, like a painting.’ (Observation notes)

Or very specific:

‘The beginning was brilliant – sharp and strong, established the piece. I like the way you got a whole story out of it. You summoned him up so quickly.’

(Observation notes)

But sometimes, where the writer is aware that a young writer could have done better, they are more critical:

‘I think you need to dive in a bit deeper. Go for the details.’

(Observation notes)

and by week ten in the programme, one writer describes being confident about giving more critical feedback:

‘Gave him a bit of critical feedback on why a piece hadn’t worked (slight laziness of description – leaning on cliché) and difficult to see how it went down, but I’m confident that the group is solid enough to handle more critical feedback and question why a piece didn’t work so well.’

(Writer’s log)

The writers were conscious of leaving the young people in control about their response to this feedback. Feedback in the group sessions was never framed as right or wrong but rather a view which was open to the young people to decide whether to accept or decline.

‘I don’t know – that’s your problem. I love the way you switch pace.’

(Observation notes)

‘We are all writers – we are all going to have different views of things. My feedback is just my feedback. You are on a journey. You have to be the person who decides. I don’t know the journey you are on and I don’t know the audience you are aiming at.’

‘There is no “right” way. The only reason I’m giving you a rule is to hear your voice. Everything you do is right.’

(Interview notes)

The writers also encouraged the young people to critique each other's work. One spoke of the importance of moving on from 'Facebook likes' and being specific about what you liked and why. In one larger group the writer paired up the young people to critique each other's work.

Feedback to written work between sessions

Writers adopted different approaches to feedback of written work. One writer, for example, started a session by reading out a small extract or a particular phrase or sentence which she found particularly powerful or effective from each piece submitted in the previous session.

Several writers gave back the writing with individual comments to each young writer during the session. Others were able to use Google Docs or shared drive to give feedback on work between sessions. Most writers differentiated the feedback they gave on the written work – offering suggestions about grammatical changes in track changes but also suggestions for changes of expression or emphasis and comments which the young people could use to adjust their writing.

The editorial process

Although during the free write and the writing process the First Story writers were keen to encourage young writers to 'switch off the internal editor', they were all clear on the importance of young writers learning and understanding the value of the editorial process.

Published writers understand that editing is a fundamental part of writing:

'If you are a professional writer you get edited all the time. Amateur writers have a fantasy that no one is going to edit them. You learn to like it.'

(Interview notes)

Similarly, the writers all felt that experiencing the rigorous editing process and attention to detail conducted by First Story in preparation for the publication was an important part of the young people's learning.

A real-life product – the importance of the anthology

Every First Story group leads to publication of an anthology of their work. Working towards a final product which is of value in the outside world often provides a motivating context in creative learning. It matters how good it is if the whole world might read it. One First Story writer expressed this really strongly. She spoke of the young people realising:

'Oh my God it's going to be there forever,' and therefore that, *'you really have to get it right.'*

(Interview notes)

She felt that by publishing their work the young people saw the value of writing their story and that the publication gave a legacy and status to their work as well as political significance. 'You have a right to participation in culture' (Interview notes).

The publication gives a meaningful context for the feedback and critique mentioned before. Although it is not always at the forefront of the dialogue between writers and young people there is a sense that the writing is for a purpose; for an audience and so feedback in this context bears more weight than work being only for assessment and read only by the teacher.

But the writers had different approaches to this and emphasised it at different points.

One writer talked about how important the publication was as part of the excitement, pointing out the ISBN number, the cover design and the production.



In some groups, the anthology was mentioned at the beginning of the residency, but then deliberately set aside for a while to focus on experimentation. There was a sense that it would come together in the end. In others, the anthology and purposeful production of writing for inclusion in the anthology wove through the sessions.

One writer had established a positive working relationship with the illustration department of a local university and illustration undergraduates worked with the young First Story writers to develop the cover. The First Story team of young writers acted as commissioners.

'The illustration students came round in groups to groups of our students, and each one pitched their cover designs. I had encouraged our students to ask them questions and to be as positive as possible about each design. They really came through! I think it was interesting for them to see how nervous these older students were!

*After the illustration students had gone, our students gathered around all the designs and debated which ones to keep. By process of elimination, they whittled them down to three. They were each encouraged to give their **own** opinions and this they did. They really debated these designs. It was a joy to witness! Everyone had their say.'*

(Writer's log)

In the eight-week First Story residency, activity inevitably focused on producing material for the anthology throughout the residency. The writer spoke about needing to take the lead in identifying themes rather than in the longer residencies where themes might emerge more naturally from young writers' ideas.

Unfortunately, I was unable to see any of the launches of the anthologies, but all of the writers referred to the sense of pride and achievement the young people had when presenting and the impact on parents, peers, other teachers and senior leaders. One writer described how they had only had a few copies of the anthology printed because she thought few people would buy them. The mother of one 'rather quirky' pupil bought all eight available copies as it was the first time she had seen her son being so successful at school.

The First story enquiry and other recent relevant literature

The LKMco literature review (LKMco 2016) identifies a number of features of effective teaching of creative writing which resonate with the observations of First Story writers. These include: the value for young people in experiencing risk taking; pedagogy including use of drama, talk, and encouragement of self-expression; provision of feedback on writing and developing students' editing skills.

It is interesting to cross-reference the observations of this small-scale enquiry into the practice of First Story creative writers with research into the role of creative practitioners within the Creative Partnerships programme. (Galton, 2008)

Galton's study analysed the work of eleven creative practitioners in both primary and secondary settings. Working as part of the Creative Partnership programme, they were collaborating with teachers to lead learning within the school day and the curriculum as opposed to in an after-school club.

Galton's approach enabled him to interpret differences between teachers' and writers' approaches to pedagogy which was not within the remit of this enquiry for First Story. Although none of the practitioners involved defined themselves as creative writers, nor was the focus creative writing, a number of the dimensions of the creative practitioners' approach to pedagogy appear to resonate strongly with findings from the observations of First Story's experienced writers.

In relation to feedback, Galton observes that, compared to teachers, creative practitioners tend to offer, 'more precise feedback'. Effective use of feedback and critique is a key feature of how experienced writers respond to young people's creative writing in the First Story programme. The creative writers tended to give more precise feedback, especially deeper into the residency.

Although teachers were not in a leadership role in the First Story sessions, when they did respond to creative writing pieces, there was a tendency to be positive, encouraging and complimentary rather than specific about an element of the writing. (One of the First Story writers who had been a teacher also commented that, 'as a teacher, I was not so interested in what was being said, I was more interested in whether their confidence had been developed.')

This is also consistent with interim findings from the Arvon Foundation's *Teachers as Writers* project which, although observing teachers' growing confidence in supporting the development of creative

writing after participating in an intensive Arvon writing week, still identified a lack of confidence in giving feedback to pupils' writing:

'There was little evidence of feedback in classrooms other than some peer feedback and during co-mentoring, revision was frequently led by the professional writers. This may indicate a residual lack of teacher confidence in critiquing writing or providing feedback which is not aligned to predetermined curriculum criteria.'

(Cremin et al 2017)

The ability and confidence of professional writers in giving feedback seems to be an important element of their approach to developing young people as writers which would be worth further exploration.

Other elements which Galton identifies, which seem particularly relevant to the First Story enquiry, are that experienced creative practitioners:

- *Gave pupils more time to think when planning and designing activities.*
- *Extended questioning sequences so that classroom discourse was dialogic rather than consisting of the more usual 'cued elicitations'.*
- *Tended to extend rather than change pupils' initial idea.*
- *Built appropriate scaffolding into the task instead of using teacher dominated approaches such as guided discovery. The former while lowering risk of failure maintained the task's ambiguity while the latter often reduced the pupils' uncertainty about what was required to a point where there was little likelihood of arriving at an unacceptable answer. Task related scaffolds appeared to encourage pupil independence whilst teacher directed ones spawned increasing dependency.*

(Galton, 2008)

Embedding practice

Horner (2010) identifies that one of the biggest challenges for creative writers in schools is to change pedagogy and embed practice. For young people to have a sustained experience of creative writing, this needs to be part of their regular experience rather than restricted to an out-of-school programme and so, influencing teachers is a valuable part of the process.

The remit of this research was to identify effective practice in First Story's most experienced practitioners rather than to compare this with the approach adopted by teachers, or to look at how teachers' practice was influenced, but there is some evidence that First Story is having wider influence on teacher pedagogy and has the potential to do more. The context of First Story work is different from the context that teachers face on a daily basis and the First Story writers I met were all very aware of this; they had the luxury of coming in as a fresh outsider, having relatively small group sizes and not having to handle curriculum and assessment pressures as well as unwilling or disruptive students. Some English teachers will no doubt already adopt some of the approaches used by First Story writers. However, there may be elements of the approaches which could usefully be embedded into mainstream teaching of English and creative writing; the approaches to stimulating imagination used by the writers, effective feedback and critique, joining in and modelling the writing process and providing scaffolding

or routes into more complex writing tasks. Such an approach would mean that the benefits of the First Story programme could last well beyond the sixteen weeks of the project.

Conclusion

When I first met five of the writers at a rather ebullient meeting in London, I imagined that there would be considerable difference in practice when I visited them in their First Story groups, as some were very lively and talkative and others seemed quieter and more reserved. Although there were some differences in practice, I was surprised at how consistent the approach they adopted and the tone and atmosphere they developed in their work with young people was. There is much to be learnt from their approach which could valuably be shared with First Story writers who are starting out for the first time. There would also be value in more experienced writers having time to reflect on their approach, not in terms of workshop activities but in terms of the underlying pedagogic principles they adopt over the sixteen-week cycle. Several writers spoke of how uncertain they were at the beginning of their work with First Story, and how, after several years, they had developed the confidence to ‘trust the process’ and to trust that, given the right conditions and stimuli, young people would flourish and share their stories in imaginative and powerful ways. I hope that this small scale review gives some insights into how to create these conditions which can be shared both in the First Story community of writers and beyond to give more opportunities to children and young people to find their voice and tell their stories.

Pat Cochrane July 2017



References

- Bernardes, E and Menzies, L. 2016. *Creative Writing in Schools, Literature Review*. London: LKMco.
- Cremin, T, Myhill, D, Oliver, L and Wilson, A. 2017. *Teachers as Writers: Executive Summary*. London: Arvon
- Dweck, C. S. 2006 *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. New York: Random House
- Galton, M. 2008. *Creative Practitioners in schools and classrooms Final report of the project: The Pedagogy of Creative Practitioners in Schools*, Cambridge: University of Cambridge
- Horner, S. 2010. *Magic Dust that Lasts: Writers in Schools – Sustaining the Momentum*, London: Arts Council England
- First Story Writers' Book. 2016. First Story internal guidance document.
- Brice Heath, S and Soep, E. 1998. *Youth Development and the Arts in Nonschool Hours*.
<http://shirleybriceheath.net/pdf/SBHYouthDevArtsNonschoolHours.pdf>. (Accessed May 2017).
- Education Endowment Foundation *Teaching and Learning Toolkit*.
<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/resources/teaching-learning-toolkit> (Accessed May 2017).

Appendix One

First story – Practitioner Research

I. Writer's log

Please keep your log in whatever format works for you. My only requirement is that you can share with me. I'm happy with a scan of handwritten notes or a notebook. Just so long as I can read it. Also I realise you may not be able to do this for every session, so please just capture what you can.

It might be helpful to separate the log into two columns or sections.

- Firstly, to record your observations immediately or soon after the session.
- And then to look back and capture your thoughts on reflection.

In action	Reflection on action
<p>Note a brief outline of your plan for the session. You will probably have a main purpose – such as freeing up imagination, building confidence etc. and then a number of activities that you are planning to use.</p> <p>What was your main purpose in each stage of the session?</p> <p>Make quick notes on the day of what happened and your observation of what went well and hunches as to why.</p> <p>Please note any particular changes you made to your plan and why you made these changes.</p> <p>Your spontaneous, authentic comments are more valuable at this stage than a refined analysis!</p> <p>Capturing where activities go wrong or where a group doesn't work is also good material for reflection.</p>	<p>A few days later when you have a bit of distance from the session go back to the notes and see if you have a different perception on what took place.</p> <p>This is the kind of reflection that you might do instinctively when planning for the next session.</p>

Please don't feel you have to prepare full blown lesson plans. I just want you to capture enough so that I can talk through with you how you shaped the activities for the young people and what you were prioritising.

For writers who were formerly secondary school teachers, it would be interesting to take a bit further the difference between what you prioritise in a First Story session and what you prioritise as a teacher.

2. Focus on young people

Reflecting on the responses of a small number of students can give real insights into your practice. Please choose two students/young people in your group to particularly reflect on. This could be one who seems very engaged and one who is less engaged. This doesn't mean you should give them more attention, but just that as you reflect on the sessions you look at how they responded to the activities and what this then leads you to do in future sessions. You might find the teacher is interested in observing this as well.

3. Next steps

After I've met with a few of you, I may send supplementary questions to follow up on any issues that are emerging from the observations and discussions.