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Real Readers, Real Writers and a Home-Grown Experience

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As with many good innovations, it began with a real and pressing problem. We wanted the students at St Ninians Primary, a large city school for children aged 5-12 years, to develop a sense of audience for their writing. In Scotland, story writing is commonly taught using story frames and planning sheets that ask students to identify the characters, the setting, the initiating problem/event and the resolution. Despite this support, students often omit important details and find it hard to 'decentre' and consider their writing from the reader's perspective. This is a vital part of becoming an author: "A sense of authorship comes from the struggle to put something big and vital into print, and from seeing one's own printed words reach the heats and minds of readers." (Calkins, 1986)

Teachers often use the term 'audience' to mean the 'intended readership'. They ask students to think about questions such as: 'Who are you writing this for?' or 'What would these people want to read?'. But to be useful to writers, the concept of audience needs to be deeper and more complex than this; it needs to be discussed in terms of the emotional impact of the writing and in terms of how readers construct their understanding. We wanted the students to explore two important gaps when writing: the first is the gap between the ideas in the writer's head and the words written on the page. The second is between the text on the page and the reader's understanding.

This is a hard concept to teach, but an important one. An understanding of the 'audience gap' drives much of the writing process. It explains why writing needs to be clear, why craft knowledge is important, and it makes the re-vision and re-drafting process meaningful rather than something students do simply because the teacher tells them to.

This more complex understanding of audience can accelerate attainment in both reading and writing. Student writers who think about how to craft a story to make the reader visualise it in a particular way, begin to spontaneously notice the writer's craft as they read (Calkins 1986). Similarly, when such students write, they think about possible interpretations and learn to become open and sensitive readers. When they link knowledge in the previously separate domains of reading and writing, students make fast progress; activities that had previously only benefited either reading or writing now offer a payoff for both reading *and* writing. (Clay 1998).

The school already used several approaches designed to help students develop a deeper sense of audience. Writing was taught in a way that involved a lot of collaborative work. Sometimes students told their stories to a writing partner and got feedback on the most interesting parts or on aspects that needed more explanation or detail before the writing task began. They regularly worked with response partners to read and discuss each other's writing and were encouraged to visualise wearing a 'Writer's Hat' for writing and a 'Reader's Hat' for reviewing and editing their work to help them bring an appropriate mindset to each task. Of course, they had plenty of teacher feedback through individual, group and whole class tutorials. However, we felt that, although all the students did all this and ostensibly listened to their teachers and took advice from their writing partners, some were just 'going through the motions'; they hadn't internalised the importance of writing coherently and didn't really *feel* the need to be explicit or clear in their writing as an urgent and personal responsibility.

The breakthrough came when we enlisted the help of people from outside school. We asked students to choose a parent or someone in their home community whom they thought would be prepared to read and respond to their writing. We explained that it needed to be someone who would have time to do this important job, and it had to be someone whom they respected and felt comfortable talking to. Although many students chose a parent, some chose a sibling, a grandparent, a family friend or child-minder to

work with. We explained the importance of the task to these home-readers in a letter (see fig. 1).

To ensure that advice was helpful and positive, and that students got specific rather than general comments, we used structured feedback sheets (see fig. 2 for an example of the type of questions contained on the sheets). These were crucial in framing the dialogue between the home reviewer and student author. We know from interviews carried out with both students and home reviewers, that it was the discussion, rather than the written comments, that helped students to understand the impact of their writing, read it from the reader's point of view and, most importantly, to *feel* the importance of this and to think seriously about the implications for their writing.

The feedback sheet in fig. 2. was used to structure the discussion for a Christmas Story that had been written in class by 10 year old students.   Before writing their stories, the class brainstormed examples of 'Good Stories for Christmas Time' and agreed that the genre should involve the struggle for good over adversity, leave the reader feeling 'warm', and have a happy ending and a strong feel-good factor. Students decided on their main characters and key events and had regular opportunities to write, draw and discuss their story with peers and the teacher during the writing process.

The first question '*Did you enjoy reading this story?*' requires a general response. Every single home reviewer ticked the top box (i.e. that they enjoyed reading the story 'a lot'). This helped to ensure a positive context for the rest of the discussion.

The next two questions sought to make the story's emotional impact on the reader very clear for our young writers. The students were delighted by the impact of their stories on the home reviewers. Some clearly felt powerful as writers for the first time. Discussion in class indicated that the emotional bonds between the writer and home reviewer heightened the importance of the emotional impact of the story, and consequently the pleasure felt by the writers. Although all students could think of at least one time when they had been emotionally affected by a story, very few had believed (or cared?) that they

might purposefully try and affect others in their own writing. This was an important reading-writing connection and was made very explicit when the students talked to their home reviewers.

The next three questions: '*Which part of the book did you particularly enjoy?*', '*Which character did you find most interesting?*' and '*Comment on the part of the book you think looks particularly attractive*' were designed to elicit serious and honest debate about the story ideas and how these had been written and presented. Many students were surprised at the home reviewer's answers and discussions touched on the craft of writing and the different ways in which the same story could be understood. Their knowledge of the child enabled reviewers to pitch explanations in ways that drew on experiences from outside school but there were also specific discussions of teaching that had taken place in school. For example, the question *Which character did you find most interesting?* prompted some students to explain particular writing techniques that had been taught in class. One student reported getting into a real debate about what made certain characters interesting. He thought that to make characters interesting, they had to do lots of things and was surprised that this wasn't the case. He said "I learned that it's not so much what the character *does*, as who the character *is inside*, that makes for an interesting character. It is like in real life – you have to think about what makes them tick".

Discussion of which part of the book looked most attractive helped students to understand the importance of layout and legible handwriting, and some reviewers talked about how pictures could add new layers of meaning to the text.

These questions, which promoted quite detailed (and potentially challenging) feedback were followed by a return to the more familiar ground of the reader's emotional response to the story. The question '*Did this book cheer you up?*' targets the key feature of the genre, that the story should have a happy, feel-good effect on the reader. Some students reported quite lengthy discussions of other books that had also cheered up their reviewer, which both broadened their understanding of the genre and introduced them to new books.

The final question, '*Did this book give you anything serious to think about?*' had perhaps the most impact of all. The written responses indicate that the Christmas Stories *did* prompt the home reviewers to think serious thoughts: They thought about the story events and characters, about people they knew and about their memories of things that had happened in the past; they thought about the writer and about themselves and, sometimes, about other stories they had heard or books they had read at Christmas. Imagine: You are ten years old and have written a Christmas Story in school. Yet here is an adult, whom you like and respect, telling you that *your* writing made them think seriously about important issues. What better illustration of the power of writing for a young author?

The final two questions *Would you like to read another book by this writer?' and 'Any further comments?'* promote a sense of authorship and an expectation that the dialogue will continue as well as allowing the home reviewer to raise any important issues not already discussed.

When this project began, some teachers were worried about the type of support and responses that could be expected from home reviewers. The school is not in the 'leafy suburbs' and has a mixed catchment area – 15.33% of the children are on free school meals and 22% are in receipt of clothing allowances. We learned that home reviewers do help students construct a better understanding of story structure and craft techniques and that they have a big impact on students' attitudes to writing and to their own development as authors. The involvement of a home reviewer provided the social and emotional engagement necessary for some students to put their full effort into the task. For others, it has prompted a genuinely inquiring approach to developing their skills as writers. Most importantly, our students are making changes because they want to, and realise that they need to, rather than because others tell them to.

Policies that promote home-school links in the upper stages of Primary school have perhaps been guilty of viewing the home as a place to practice skills previously taught in

school. Perhaps this approach needs re-thinking. It may be more beneficial to start designing tasks which offer a different type of learning experience by building on what most homes offer in abundance: love, a deep shared history and a huge interest in the child as a person.

References

Calkins McKormick, L (1986) *The Art of Teaching Writing*. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann

Clay, M (1998) *By Different Paths to Common Outcomes* York, Maine: Stenhouse Publishers

Fig. 1: Letter sent home to parents
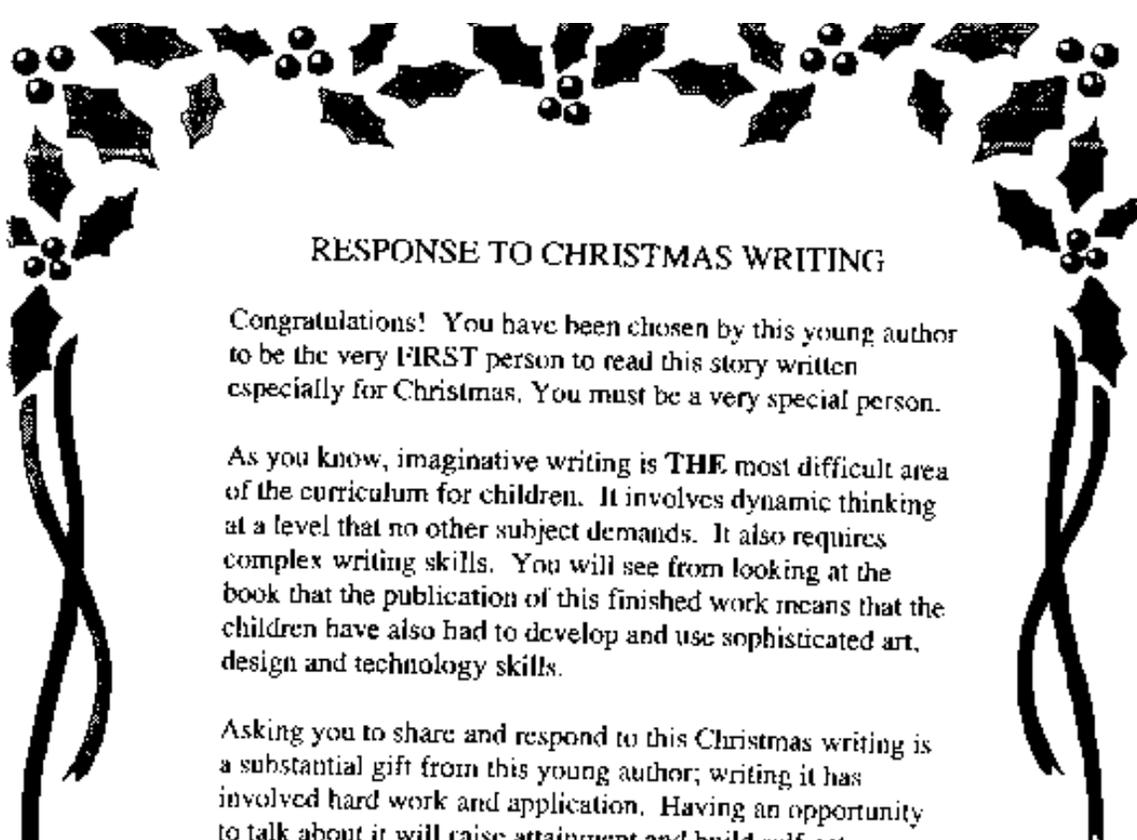
RESPONSE TO CHRISTMAS WRITING

Congratulations! You have been chosen by this young author to be the very FIRST person to read this story written especially for Christmas. You must be a very special person.

As you know, imaginative writing is **THE** most difficult area of the curriculum for children. It involves dynamic thinking at a level that no other subject demands. It also requires complex writing skills. You will see from looking at the book that the publication of this finished work means that the children have also had to develop and use sophisticated art, design and technology skills.

Asking you to share and respond to this Christmas writing is a substantial gift from this young author; writing it has involved hard work and application. Having an opportunity to talk about it will raise attainment and build self-esteem even further.

Would you please take the time to read the story and talk to the author. The reader response sheet on the other side of this letter indicates some key areas in which we would like your response. If you are too busy to write the response, please feel free to dictate it and let the author act as scribe.

Merry Christmas,

Gill Friel
Head Teacher

Fig. 2: Reader Response Questions

Did you enjoy reading this book?   A lot ☑   A little ☐   Not at all ☐ *(please tick ✓)*

Did any part of the story make you sad or frightened?
Yes & No, when the angel lost her magic dust I was sad, but I knew that Emma would help her find it!

Did any part of the story make you laugh?
Yes, the bit where the angel smiled & winked at Emma.

Which part of the book did you particularly enjoy?
I enjoyed it all, particularly the letter that the angel wrote at the end.

Which character did you find most interesting?

Comment on the part of the book you think looks particularly attractive.
Dad was interesting but not as much as the angel & Emma!

Did this book cheer you up?
Very much so, it reminds me of some of the good things about Christmas – sharing, kindness, friendship

Did this book give you anything serious to think about?
The effort & love that Emma put into creating the book & the story.

Would you like to read another book by this author?
Most definitely.

Any further comment.
When will the film be made! & released.

AUTHOR'S NAME Emma .... REVIEWER'S NAME ....

CLASS 4M