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Session Report: Teaching and Assessing Writing Skills

Writing is perhaps the most obviously visible aspect of a pupil's learning and a huge proportion of a pupil's time in school is spent on directed writing of some sort or other, much more than they as adults are ever likely to do. Writing can be a powerful means of self expression and is a useful way of demonstrating learning. A lot of assessment data can be gained from written work and writing is generally taken seriously by pupils. That is not to say that they enjoy writing but the fact that it is concrete and visible gives it a greater importance or status to pupils than, for example, speaking and listening activities.

Writing takes many forms and the curriculum for secondary English has to take this into account. Some of these types of writing may be practiced in life generally, others in school in particular. The following is a list I have drawn up of the types of writing that children may have to practice at school (not only in their English lessons), whether they are intended for preparation for adult life or for creative writing or exam practice:

- Letter writing, formal or informal;
- Journals and diary writing;
- Poetry composition;
- Formal essays, which could be narrative, descriptive or discursive;
- Analytical and empathetic writing in response to literature;
- Play scripts or dialogues
- Media-based writing, such as newspapers, magazines, advertisements, web pages;
- Statistics, graphs and charts.
- Note taking;
- Reminders, requests, memos, messages, lists;
- Surveys and questionnaires;
- Writing using ICT: word processing, e-mail, desk-top publishing etc.;
- Assessment sheets.

Purposes of writing tasks

English in the National Curriculum (1995, p.23, 1b) makes a distinction between two purposes for writing:

1) to inform others through instruction, explanation, argument, narration, reportage, description, persuasion and paraphrase.

2) to develop thinking through review, analysis, hypothesis, recollection and summary.

GCSE and SATS papers and coursework ask questions testing these skills. There is a vast amount to cover. Many English Departments will have a particular scheme of work for each year group which is based on writing in different styles and for different purposes as practice of some of these writing skills which is essential in preparation for formal assessments. Other schemes of work will incorporate other forms of writing, of course.

Whatever type of writing a teacher asks its pupils to produce it is essential that the teacher first models it. I would also say that the writing should have a purpose - that the pupils can see what they will be learning from a task, how it is connected to other work they are doing or have done and that they know who exactly will be reading it.

A short scheme of work practicing different writing skills

It may be that you wish to choose three or four types of writing and then plan a series of lessons working on these skills coming from one starting point as a basis, for example a poem or film. This is what we looked at doing with the poem *Fresh Water* by Andrew Motion (from *Salt Water*, Faber, 1997). Although this poem is a reasonably level, it could be read and the activities we looked at could be adapted for use with any ability group in Key Stages 3 and 4.

The poem is written in four distinct sections, each representing a season of the year. The poem is an attempt at a life story, the journey of the poet along the Thames from source to estuary signifies his own journey of life from childhood to adulthood. However, the twist of the story is that we discover we are also following the life cycle of the poet's friend whose life reaches a tragic conclusion.

We were instructed to read one section at a time, not continuing to the next until we had discussed the first with ideas for writing activities based on this section.

Section One

We begin the poem with a visit by the poet and his brother to the source of the River Thames. It is winter. The poet and his brother are young, under the age of twenty, and we are given the impression that this is a time when they are carefree, having not yet taken on the responsibilities of adulthood. This is a time of self discovery and awakening.

Writing activity

Write the diary entry of the brother. The assumption being that his writing will be somewhat blander than his brother's description of the day. Although the pupils may be quite familiar with diary/journal writing, a model or example would nevertheless need to be looked at for ideas about style, tone, presentation etc. Some useful ideas for writing this could be:

- To give him a name;
- Describe where he is (in his own words). Does he notice the same things as his brother does?;
- What is the weather like?;
- What mood is he in?;
- What is he thinking about?;
- What does he see, smell, feel, hear?;
- What is he wearing?;
- What is he going to do next?;
- How does he feel about his brother?

Section Two

We find the poet by the banks of the Thames in spring. Some time, years, have passed since the first section of the poem and he is meeting a friend who has a boat on the river. There is lots of description about the nature surrounding him. This is a time of choices, choosing the right path ahead.

Writing activity

Write a Haiku. The structure of the poem so far (3 lines stanzas) and the evocation of seasons and of nature lend it to an investigation into Haiku's. The activity would be to write a Haiku. Pupils may need to be taught what a Haiku is and be given examples as models.

What is a Haiku?

Haiku is a traditional form of Japanese poetry. They are normally about some aspect of nature, possibly evoking a season or time, and generally follow the principles of minimalism and immediacy. Minimalism means a simple and clear style, and immediacy means a direct, instant impact. It is a very effective way of using a few words to say a lot. I have seen some very good examples written by Year 7 pupils as an entry to a school poetry competition the theme of which was 'Celebration'.

Haiku's have a fixed form which must consist of three lines. The first line usually has five syllables, the second seven and the third five again.

Here are some examples (taken from www.teachit.co.uk):

Tea-leaf in my cup; (5 syllables)
did you read your own future, (7 syllables)
growing in China? (5 syllables)

The first line has five. (5 syllables)
The second line has seven. (7 syllables)
The third line has five. (5 syllables)

Section Three

It is summer. The poet is watching the river together with a crowd of people as police divers swim to the rivers depths to find something, although we do not know what yet.

Writing activity

Write a police report. This activity may be a difficult one to model accurately but you could direct the pupils to writing factual accounts. Think about what the police would be interested in (not the seasons, view, nature). What is it they are looking for in the river? What exactly ahs happened and what has caused their enquiries. Describe the scene as the police find it. Are there any witnesses?

Alternative activity

A mystery. Using deductive language and modal verbs ('It must have been raining when.....' 'She couldn't have seen the assailant because...'). Set the scene. Place objects or clues. Have witness statements on hand. Examples of this can be found in a whole range of detective/mystery novels and children's mystery/solve it type books such as those published by 'Usbourne'. Pupils could be given roles and then interviewed by other pupils posing as police investigators. The final piece could be written as the closing chapter of a mystery novel when all is revealed. I imagine this being done particularly effectively by Years 7 and 8.

Section Four

The poet is now a man with a family of his own. It is autumn and the family are looking out at the river in London. Here the poet is reminiscing about his friend Ruth who we discover was a victim of the Marchioness disaster. We also learn now that the life story we have been taken on has been that of Ruth's, but in reverse.

Writing Activity

*Write a literary essay about **Fresh Water**.* This is the culmination of the work on the poem and would need to be modelled more than anything else, especially for younger, less experienced pupils as it is possible that they have read or written a diary entry before, for example, but this type of writing is specific only really to academia. Models can be found in abundance on the Internet, or from exam materials and mark schemes. You may also be able to use essays written by your previous pupils.

A formal essay of this nature should be structured similar to this:

1. **Description** . Say what it is - whether it be a novel, poem, film etc. Who is it by? What are the sections or chapters? What parallels can be drawn within the work or between it and others?
2. **Appreciation**. The writers response to the work. Likes and dislikes. Comment on language choice.
3. **Interpretation**. Patterns and puzzles. What is it 'really' about?

This structure could be used for an analysis or discussion on virtually anything from *Pride and Prejudice* to *Bridget Jones' Diary* or objects or aspects from everyday life such as 'the Mini car' or 'the Pill'.

When assessing work at Key Stage 3 the SATS levels can be used and applied. A pupil writing an essay that covers only point 1 above will gain a Level 5. For Level 6 a pupil would need to write about points 1 and 2. For Level 7 they would need to include point 3. Finally to achieve a Level 8 a pupil would need to express all of their ideas about points 1,2 and 3 in an original and perceptive way.

Reflection on my own practice

At this stage I have not really taught any lessons independently where I could be practicing writing skills with pupils. However I have learnt a lot from observing lessons and from looking at my department's schemes of work. I have also attended useful faculty meetings and Inset days which have focussed on the new GCSE papers and have, from these, worked closely with colleague on finding new resources and developing new schemes of work.

I have to admit that I have been surprised and a little over-whelmed by the broad range of writing styles pupils at Key Stages 3 and 4 are expected to learn and become competent at and that I will have to teach as required by the National Curriculum and in preparation for their SATS and GCSEs. It has been eye-opening for me to look at past exam papers and sample answers, seeing the levels of writing it is possible for pupils

to reach.

I have also learnt that resources for lessons as a basis or model for a section of work can be found almost anywhere and it is important to accumulate collections as potential resources. The list of possible materials is endless but could include:

- junk mail leaflets;
- magazine or newspaper articles, reports, editorials, obituaries, letters papers, reviews;
- Art postcards;
- Old postcards or letters;
- Official/formal letters;
- Advertisements;
- Web pages.

Finally, I might mention here that since looking at the short scheme of work based on *Freshwater* and also *Beside the Reservoir* by Philip Gross at college, I have given the ideas to a colleague in my own English department who is planning to use it with her Year 10 group this term. This, I think also demonstrates the value in sharing ideas for lessons with your colleagues.

References

Davidson, J and Dowson, J (2002) *Learning to Teach English in the Secondary School*, Routledge Falmer.

Fleming, M and Stevens, D (2000) *English Teaching in the Secondary School*, David Fulton Publishers.

The National Curriculum for English.

