Seeing, Doing, Writing: The Write Here Project

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Abstract

As political agendas change, the teaching of writing continues to evolve, encompassing different writing practices in an attempt to address the perceived needs for literacy in our society. This article presents the Write Here project, which aims to boost children's social development and literacy attainment through engagement with visual art, play, and multimodal learning, delivered in both art gallery and classroom settings. The valuable knowledge gained at the end of this study was evaluated and developed further through a series of extended collaborations between professional, postgraduate and undergraduate writers, and schoolchildren and their teachers. Our findings suggest that engaging young learners with creative, playful, multimodal activities will foster their confidence and motivation to engage with the subject and, more importantly, will lead to a significant improvement in literacy attainment.

Keywords

literacy, creative writing, visual art, multimodal learning, gallery education

Introduction

All children have stories to tell. But many are hampered in their ability to write them down. The reasons for this may include lack of confidence or practical skills, having English as a second language, learning disabilities, or cultural deficits. This difficulty in communicating through written forms affects both the children's social development and their academic attainment, with serious consequences for prospects in adult life. The Write Here collaborative project was designed to address the challenges children face as writers. It drew from Dorothy Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert dramatic enquiry teaching approach to allow a certain degree of learner flexibility and creativity in exploring the process of writing, as opposed to learning about different writing styles. Our main goals included (a) testing how visual art, play, and multimodal learning can help engage children with purposeful, meaningful creative writing practices; (b) capitalizing on this motivation to support the acquisition of practical "nuts and bolts" writing skills; and (c) promoting the engagement of young people with art galleries. The project involved a professional writer working in residency in both an art gallery and in schools, collaborating with a gallery education officer and a lead schoolteacher, to develop a sustainable body of practice designed to support young people's confidence and skill in writing.

Context

The Teaching of Literacy

> Writing is a complex set of practices which is far more than a set of skills. (National Writing Project, 1989)

Over the past 50 years, different approaches to the teaching of writing "have been influenced by the debate of the day" (Bearne, Chamberlain, Cremin, & Mottram, 2011, p. 4). In the 1960s, writing was regarded as a "creative" activity. By the mid-1970s, the internationally renowned linguist Michael Halliday (Halliday, 2002) emphasized the significance of social processes for developing writing skills. In this view, children should initiate the learning, and the teacher responds with support, but not by direct teaching. By the early 1980s, Donald Graves's (1983) initiative "Writer's Workshop" had pioneered what the National Writing Project described as "the Horticultural model of development" (p. 9). He identified the importance of what a child brings to the writing process (including experiences and

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assumptions learned outside school) and the role of the teacher as a fellow "writer." Since the 1990s, however, the establishment of a National Curriculum and the work of the National Strategies in the United Kingdom have led teachers to regard writing as a set of skills, which need to be taught directly. In this process, children work through each stage until they achieve a finished product—that is, planning, drafting, revising, and editing before the final copy is made (Department for Education and Employment, 1998). Since the turn of the century, writing has remained at the top of the national educational agenda, for two main reasons: (a) the much poorer results achieved by 10- to 11-year-olds in writing, compared with reading, maths, and science, at the end of Key Stage 2 Standard Assessment Tests (SATs), and (b) the poor performance of boys in writing (Palmer & Corbett, 2003). The implementation from autumn 2014 of the New National Curriculum in England indicates how writing remains a priority in schools today, and the subject of bitter debate.

Key Practitioners

> Before they can write, children need meaningful experiences to write about, and opportunities to talk them through. (Palmer & Corbett, 2003, p. 45)

Pie Corbett, the educational writer and poet, was an advisor to the previous Labour Government (1997-2010). In 2008, he introduced "Talk for Writing" (now common practice in U.K. classrooms), at the heart of which lies children's talk and discussion as a prerequisite to the writing process. He has developed a multisensory approach to the teaching of writing, to appeal to different learning styles. In this approach, a new story with archetypal structure and tropes is read to the class, who then cocreate a visual map of the story using a set of visual symbols that have been learned. The story is then told physically by the children in groups (using the map as prompt) with performative symbols so the story becomes *embodied* by the pupils. Subsequently, when writing the story down as text, the children gradually substitute their own individual words, characters, and actions into the original story, making it their own. The "Talk for Writing" process advocates strongly that the teacher should play a pivotal role in modeling a scaffolded writing process to help the child engage with "shared" given texts and encourage their "guided" and then "independent" writing. This process responds to Corbett's observation that children need to internalize language constructions through the "imitation" and oral rehearsal of given texts, "acting out" the narrative in class together, using visual maps or cues to build confidence. When the words, structures, and phrases are sufficiently embedded through this process, the children are in a position to "substitute" their own ideas, and subsequently "innovate" their own spoken and written narratives and nonfiction texts with confidence. This method has been shown to be highly effective, improving the quality of writing, and increasing

the child's motivation and engagement. This is especially true for boys, for children using English as an additional language, and for those with special educational needs (Corbett, 2008).

The importance of talk in laying the foundation for a writing process is also supported by Sue Palmer, a former primary head teacher, writer, and education consultant. Palmer argues that human beings are not "hard-wired" for literacy, whereas we *are* "hard-wired" for speech (Palmer, 2011). She believes we are able to talk and articulate as we are exposed to speech from birth. This is very different to reading and writing, which have to be explicitly taught. However, literacy is more than an agglomeration of speaking, listening, and writing. Literacy affects the way people think, view, and construct the world around them. Talking about one's experience is essential to writing about it. Palmer introduces the "Two Horses Before the Cart" model for writing, originating from the assumption that writing without any talking is, "putting the cart before the horse." In this approach, children are required to use two different types of talk: *talk for learning*, which gives them the opportunity to discuss the subject they are going to write about; and *talk for writing*, which is a discussion of the reading and technical writing of a type of text. Palmer has developed writing "skeletons" to support the transference of talk into writing. These skeletons help to organize and plan the writing process by using diagrammatic representations and visual models, which can support even very young children's thought processes.

Like Corbett, Palmer is offering children a range of tools and methods of motivation for the job in hand. But there is still debate among leading practitioners about the relationship between—or prioritization of—"skills acquisition" and "creativity" in developing young writers. Some studies support the view that writing skills need to be taught first (Wilson, 2002), whereas others argue against establishing a "crude checklist" to allow children to *think* like writers, to become motivated, thoughtful, and creative in their endeavors (Corbett, 2008).

This project adopted the "Talk for Writing" approach, making use of the aforementioned individual and collaborative processes, but also extending them into new practice to explore greater detail in writing, and more varied degrees of individual authorship of the archetypal story. The strategy proposed by Corbett was particularly suitable for this study, as so many children in participating schools (especially in Mellers, which was the lead school) use English as a second language, and this technique proved to benefit the pupils in the past.

Multimodal Learning and Play

Children can, and need to, learn in a variety of different ways. These have been described variously as "learning styles," "multiple intelligences," or "personalized learning." Individual learners may have preferences for a particular

sensory modality (e.g., visual, auditory, or kinesthetic) and, as a result, may engage with the learning process more enthusiastically. However, recent scientific evidence suggests that (notwithstanding the very important motivational benefits) new knowledge is not necessarily processed more effectively if young learners receive information according to their preferred learning style. This is due to the fact that although visual, auditory, and kinesthetic information is indeed processed in different parts of the brain, these parts are highly interconnected (Coffield, Moseley, Hall, & Ecclestone, 2004; Dekker et al., 2012; Gilmore, McCarthy, & Spelke, 2007). Bearing the above in mind, this study adopts the term *multimodal learning*, and bases its definition on Goodwin (2005): "the engagement of all senses in interpreting different parts of the story offers visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic support to all the children—especially for those for whom language and literacy are not easy" (p. xv). Multimodal here embraces the social, verbal, and playful elements advocated by practitioners alluded to above.

Play is as important to young children's linguistic development as it is to their social and emotional development. Play as formalized through drama, or as expressed through visual mark making, offers opportunities to "explore the possible" socially and emotionally (Craft, 2000, p. 53). In 1978, Lev Vygotsky argued that "It is incorrect to conceive of play as activity without purpose . . . Creating an imaginary situation can be regarded as a means of developing abstract thought" (p. 103). He also stated earlier that "in play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself" (Vygotsky, 1967, p. 16). Visual play and drama make a child's imagination tangible and visceral. In terms of the performative aspects of play, it can help children to interpret, create, and communicate ideas. The Write Here project used drama as "an emancipatory device that frees its participants from the constraints of reality" (Aitken, 2013, p. 51). The intention here was to enable young learners to inhabit a state of *metaxis*, or in other words, a state of belonging to two autonomous worlds at the same time, which is applicable to performance studies when actors go in and out of character (Kuksa and Childs 2014: 166). In this research, it refers to dramatic role-taking by the young learners, to embrace multiple viewpoints and perspectives when exploring a particular issue or emotion. This ongoing awareness of both the fictional world and the social reality of the classroom strengthens the children's ability to reflect on the task, as well as helping them to realize that there is a multitude of possible solutions to a given problem classroom (Boal, 1995; Edmiston, 2003).

Unfortunately, however, in mainstream education, such use of "play" and "drama" is all too often left behind after Key Stage 1 (ages 5-7), and abandoned all together by Key Stage 2 (ages 7-11; or limited to occasional basic drama lessons and role-play). Even teachers who want to use drama as a tool (for literacy or elsewhere across the curriculum) may have had very limited exposure to drama techniques during training. They may lack the confidence to use it, or may not even value it is a thing "of itself." By its nature, drama requires risk-taking, asks uncomfortable questions, and can challenge hierarchy in the learning space; but it cannot be forced to a predetermined conclusion, hence its potential for use in fostering children's creative writing.

The discouragement of children to learn through play, after a certain age, is mirrored by a long-standing and reductive tendency in the subject of visual art. Here, pupils aged 7 and above are suddenly required to "represent" the world literally, as opposed to being able to "interpret" it more abstractly, which was deemed more acceptable for younger children in the past. The disadvantages of this formalist approach are evident to Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) lecturers involved in interviewing art foundation or arts degree candidates at the end of the mainstream school cycle. Many 18-year-olds spend their first year of higher education in a process of unlearning, reacquainting themselves with experimentation and playfulness, and reeducating themselves to take responsibility for their own, non-objective led learning.

Research Questions and Aims

The main research question posed by the Write Here project was as follows:

> **Research Question 1:** How can visual art and multimodal learning increase motivation, and attainment in literacy?

The project engaged in the essential task of facilitating all children in their literacy development, regardless of background, life experience, mother tongue, or "ability." The main aims were incremental and interconnected: (a) to inspire and motivate children's writing through experiential engagement with visual art, (b) to develop techniques designed to improve attainment in writing generally, and (b) to find ways to engage more young people with art galleries.

Philosophically and politically, the Write Here project aimed to challenge the (now prevailing) tendency toward learning that is objective-led and predicated on knowledge acquisition, accompanied by an unseemly and aggressive flight from explorative learning. The project was conceived partly to address the debate about the value of play and formal learning, which has become polarized and acrimonious. The current Coalition government's agenda visibly exerts downward pressure on state schoolteachers who wish to teach literacy (and other subjects) creatively. Children need a variety of "playful, profound, and unusual" experiences to draw on, to develop their communication skills (Rumney, 2008). Connecting with children's personal experiences is not only an *effective* way of fostering their engagement with core literacy skills, but also a *meaningful* one. But the project sought to

demonstrate that nurturing a creative writing process can support not only a sense of personal achievement, but measurable attainment as well. The effects of teaching literacy creatively have been evidenced recently by data collected by the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE) in a study that demonstrates how the intervention of professional writers into schools can have a remarkable effect on both achievement and attainment (see Owen & Munden, 2010). The decision to involve a professional writer in this project was based on teachers' beliefs that the act of writing becomes more *meaningful* when it is shared by a professional reading or creating their own text. This brought an alternative working knowledge, a fresh perspective to the use of vocabulary, grammar, and punctuation, and unexpected literary ideas (e.g., using several genres), which expanded and challenged the received approaches of the school curriculum. Interestingly, in this study, the fact that the writer was male had a significant impact on boys, who traditionally have more negative (sometimes culturally informed) attitudes to writing.

Method

The Write Here project was a longitudinal examination of "cycles of shared learning," focused on developing children's writing skills and creative thinking. The core project worked with 900 children from 12 primary and secondary schools. It extended the previous NAWE research, by placing a writer into both an art gallery setting, and a lengthy residency in a lead school. The project's methodology was predicated on an extended, tripartite relationship between a writer (Peter Rumney), an art gallery learning officer (Ruth Lewis-Jones, Djanogly Gallery, Lakeside Arts Centre, University of Nottingham), and a literacy coordinator (Joy Buttress, Mellers Primary School, Radford). This triumvirate of practitioners sharing diverse pedagogies was supported by Writing East Midlands, by undergraduates and graduates from both the University of Nottingham and Nottingham Trent University, and by the Nottingham Central Improvement Partnership. Over a year, 840 pupils, aged 5 to 14 attended the gallery for a half-day session, developing their writing skills further after they returned to school. In addition, 60 pupils at Mellers were allocated the role of "experts" for the project, with their attainment being statistically measured. All the gallery sessions were modeled, planned, and evaluated in conjunction with staff and pupils at Mellers, and with the Djanogly gallery team. Preparatory and post-gallery sessions were conducted in Mellers to deepen and extend the research methodology. The techniques developed there were applied and refined in microcosm with the other schools in the four core gallery exhibitions explored in the project. Baseline assessments, teacher profiling and evaluations, SATs results, and pupil self-evaluations were used to test the efficacy of the approach, demonstrating its effects on motivation and a sense of "achievement," and on "attainment" in writing.

In light of the pedagogical context discussed above, three assumptions were made about the development of children's literacy: (a) that they need to *play* to maximize learning, (b) that *multimodal* activities are crucial in engaging imaginations and attention, and (c) that visual art of all kinds offers an open-ended, empathetic stimulus through which children use their own life experiences and imaginations to motivate writing. Philosophically, the methodology was underpinned by principles of discovery-based learning (Bruner 1967, 1987), mediated by enhanced discovery learning (Marzano, 2011), and facilitated by use of both "soft" and "hard" scaffolding to engage different learning styles (Brush & Saye, 2002). Practically, the study drew on and developed whole school approaches to writing (such as the "Talk for Writing" and "Big Writing" schemes).

One might argue that persuasive or report writing have an equivalent (or even more important) role in adult life, requiring a different form of discourse than that of creative writing. This study, however, is in agreement with Aitken (2013), who states that by adopting Mantle of the Expert approach, the students are no longer asked to carry out a piece or writing "because we are learning about persuasive writing" (p. 46), but instead, they are empowered to be more in charge of their learning process. It could also be claimed that all the skills learned through the creative writing, such as narrative structure and editing techniques, can be applied to formal writing structures as taught in school. In this article, however, we intend to avoid any deliberate tendencies to polarize one approach from another.

Dorothy Heathcote's dramatic enquiry teaching approach was influential in determining the project methodology, as were later iterations of her philosophy. This approach known as *Mantle of the Expert* encompasses the idea of "learning growing like a mantle" (Aitken, 2013, p. 35) and, as Ericsson (2011) argues, is highly applicable within the new field called *arts didactics* (an approach explored in the research project Kunstfagdidaktikk, led by Professor Aslaug Nyrnes, at Bergen University College in 2004-2008).

> There are several good reasons to revisit the work of Heathcote today. For one thing, it represents an approach to teaching that strives to empower pupils to reflect critically about issues. It also stands for a pedagogy that seeks to involve the class collectively in a process of investigation, and it works from an art-based philosophy of education that is not informed by a romantic prioritising of creative expression inherited from the progressive education movement, or a prioritising of performance of worship of individual talent that is modelled in contemporary competitions for young people on television. (Eriksson, 2011, p. 101)

The Mantle of the Expert methodology is quite flexible and brings together "the individual and the collective, language and cognition" (Eriksson, 2011, p. 102); it places the child in the center of the learning process, responsive to his or her needs (Heston, 1993). This approach, however, is far from

child-led. Aitken (2013) argues that although it assumes a progressive view of learning and positions the child as its competent co-constructor, it also requires careful teacher planning and designing activities appropriate to the curriculum level. Children are not just "given expert status in an empty way, but are encouraged to earn and justify that position" (Aitken, 2013, p. 52). One of the teaching modalities the Mantle of the Expert approach relies on is the concept based on the study of "a frame" by the sociologist and writer Erving Goffman (1986). He argued that every individual uses conceptual frames as a means of organizing his or her experiences and structuring his or her societal perceptions. The allocation of the role of an expert to the young learners (or, in other words, framing them as such) empowers them to take responsibility for their own learning process and subsequently improve their achievements (Kahnemann, 2012).

Case Studies

Having postulated that play and multimodal activities are important to developing creative writing, the art gallery provided a unique "domain" for young people's engagement with both art and literacy. It offered a significantly different experience from encountering individual artworks (sponsored by supermarkets) hanging in the school corridor, however useful and pleasing to the eye such benefactions might be. An art exhibition, or a collection of museum artifacts, offers audience choice. Making choices about which works to gravitate or respond to leads to more active learning. The gallery acts as a transformative or liminal space in which to encounter art, a place full of opportunities to construct new knowledge, question the self, and express this through the written word. The Write Here team used four Lakeside Arts Centre Gallery exhibitions (2010-2012) as sites to stimulate children's engagement with art and literacy. All these exhibitions offered powerful, motivational stimuli to the making of meaningful stories (through prose or poetry), and opportunities to explore writing techniques once the children had been engaged.

This article focuses on two contrasting case studies from the body of work. In the first, *Revolution on Paper* (2009-2011), we discuss how the artwork was used to explore the writing of prose, with an emphasis on understanding narrative structures. The children engaged with the art through a process of empathy, which motivated them to understand and attempt the detailed task of developing narrative causality. This case study also examines how the work was prepared for and followed up in the school classroom, and how the Write Here project was connected to and developed a major literacy strategy, Pie Corbett's "Talk for Writing" alluded to earlier. In the second case study, *Dust on the Mirror* (2010-2011), we discuss how the gallery offered opportunities to write poetry. Children responded to the artworks through a process of reflection and contemplation, which excited their poetic imaginations and led to writing that was liberated through experimentation with formal structures.

Revolution on Paper was a British Museum traveling exhibition of poster and print art (1910-1960), which explored the politics, iconography, and aesthetics of the mid-20th century Mexican post-revolutionary period (Ades, & McCLean 2009). Images of class struggle propaganda, the experience of urban and rural poverty, the influence of indigenous cultures on modern Mexican life, the symbolism *Day of the Dead* festivities, and global concerns in the Totalitarian era jostle with intense portraiture, all encapsulated in Diego Rivera's iconic portrait of *Emiliano Zapata and His Horse* (1932). Through engaging with and responding to this exhibition, 90 children aged 9 to 14 achieved complex and advanced narrative writing, which reflected their own contemporary lives. The process described below embraces the gallery-based work undertaken by all the participating school, and the pre-research and follow-up research work carried out in the lead school.

Pre-work (Mellers, 60 children). The gallery visit was prepared for by a series of kinesthetic interventions in the participating school hall. The purpose was twofold: (a) to encourage engagement with and empathy for characters depicted and (b) to inculcate and extend the pupils' understanding of narrative structures and archetypes. Physical work included the embodiment of pictures through tableaux, the description of an artwork to peers who could not see it, and the development of personal narratives from art images, through discussion. A series of warm-up exercises were developed to start addressing "causality" in narrative, to deal with "and then syndrome" (Wray & Lewis, 2005), which is one of the biggest challenges to young writers. For example, a backward learning game called "And . . . Why . . . Because" was devised and introduced. In this, an archetypal story opening (e.g., "A girl walked into the forest, and . . . .") is offered to the group by the writer/teacher. Each child has then to develop the narrative in turn by saying "and" what happened next. The exercise is then repeated, but the story begins, "A girl walked into the forest . . .Why? . . . Because . . . " Each child has now to explain in turn the narrative events in terms of causality (e.g., "*Why* did the girl walk into the forest?" "*Because* she was running away." "*Why* was she running away?" "*Because* she was scared." "*Why* was she scared?" "*Because* . . . etc."). This process encouraged lateral thinking through word association activities and was a helpful precursor to interpreting the visual artworks in the gallery.

Gallery work (four schools, 90 children). After orientation to the gallery experience, the children were asked to investigate the Mexican Revolutionary art with minimal (historical) context (Figure 1), and the simple question, "What are these Mexican artists trying to say to us about the world?" Children were free to select the images that most interested, puzzled, or annoyed them, and discussed the content in small groups supported by an adult (from the professional and student volunteer team).

Figure 1. "Revolution on Paper": Preparing the pupils for engaging with the gallery artwork.

Figure 2. "Revolution on Paper": Acting out the images before developing written narratives.

Drama was used to interrogate the artwork, and key images were brought to life through tableaux, which were responded to and developed by other pupils in the class (Figure 2). The children identified very strongly with the images of another era and culture. In enacting and discussing the revolutionary imagery, they were able to articulate very clearly their own understanding of class and gender politics, notions of justice, and family dynamics. One refugee with little English later wrote,

> I thought it was brilliant . . . and when we look at the stories I felt that I was scared because if I was in that time, I might be dead because of the war that killed their father . . . their story was important because it was true . . . because I've seen lots in my life, because I have lots of things like war and I want to learn more about them. Was it like my story or not? . . . (Eritrean refugee aged 10, Mellers)

Although this child's personal experiences may be an extreme and particular example of empathy with the artworks, it did demonstrate the general empathetic response of the children to the exhibition, and their motivation to make stories from it.

After these initial engagements, the children were introduced to novel ways of identifying narrative structure, through words, symbols, and kinesthetic structures, such as story strings. These are simple, long lengths of twine that are manipulated by the child to create a flexible (and changeable) narrative "thread" that maps a story on the floor or large sheet of paper. Post-it notes are then used to assay and write down possible narrative events and way markers in the narrative journey, inspired by the child's chosen picture. The post-it notes are moved around the string at will, providing a skeleton for more detailed writing of the story later on. The story can be written from any point in the narrative, but participants were challenged to invent their personalized story *backward* from the very end (literally writing it upward from the bottom of the page) to foster causal thinking and to facilitate the shifting of writer's block. The "And . . . Why . . . Because" game was reintroduced to facilitate this process. After initial reticence, *all* the gallery visitors embraced this "backward" writing technique, irrespective of whether they had encountered it previously in school.

Post-gallery follow-up sessions (Mellers, 60 children). The writer was asked by the class teacher to write a short five-part story inspired by one of the Mexican poster images, but adhering strictly to the format set out by Corbett's "Talk for Writing" scheme (which had previously been adopted by the school) Rumney's new archetypal story (*Bala and Wareem*) drew consciously on the life experiences of the children as perceived from their fictional writing in the early gallery interactions. The new story was then used in the "Talk for Writing" model. It was mapped out visually, then acted out and told through a version of coded sign language. Once the story and its structure had been learned and embodied physically in this way by the children, they developed it into their own narratives through independent writing. Elements of the original story were substituted with their own ideas, thus innovating and personalizing the story into new and distinctive narratives.

This use of the "Talk for Writing" process with an art-inspired story was successful, but it raised the question of whether more *detailed* writing could be achieved by extending this scheme in new ways. To investigate this, a set of exercises was devised using playing cards and the simple well-known game of "Sevens" to develop further the concepts of sequencing and backward thinking. Returning to the story strings and causal games, the pupils continued writing their own narratives, but backward, constantly expanding and developing detail through the post-it note mapping structure. The stories were then rewritten from the beginning. This also introduced practically the idea of editing in story writing. At the same time, the children were asked to consider and subsume familiar strategies from their classroom teaching into the new story (e.g., focusing on particular parts

of speech or grammatical tropes). In addition, in Mellers, visual artist Huw Feather worked alongside the writer to create group drawings of the new stories, using TV camera techniques ("close-ups," "mid-shots," and "long-shots") to "focus" on different aspects of the narrative structure and character development through storyboarding, helping to refine the writing further. Finally, the children used the same storyboarding techniques to evaluate the whole Write Here project, discussing it as if it were a narrative of the kind that had been inculcated during the writing process. They critically assessed the work in detail, considering the advantages and disadvantages to their own learning of all the writing techniques described above, scoring the stages accordingly. In addition to this raw material, the teaching staff contextualized the children's evaluations according to their own assessments of the pupils in terms of ability, attainment, and learning needs. This process was subsequently used by the team to evaluate the whole Write Here process.

Dust on the Mirror (eight schools, 290 children) was an exhibition of multimedia art (drawing, painting, and video installation) by Siân Bowen, Christopher Cook, Susan Derges, Donna Ong, and Charwei Tsai (Godfrey, 2010). The artists used materials such as graphite, light particles, and film to create contemplative, abstract artworks (Figure 3). Central to the exhibition (and therefore germane to the Write Here research) were the notions of interconnectedness, deep thinking, and sensual imagining, which were used to explore a range of writing issues: reflection and the finding of characters and generation of stories, freeing up the writing process, generating language and poetic ideas, manipulating expressive language and finding structure for poetic ideas, and editing.

Whereas the gritty realism and macabre fantasy of the Mexican revolutionary exhibition enabled young people to write stories derived from relatively direct connections they made with their own lives, engagement with the meditative and reflective works in *Dust on the Mirror* engendered calm abstraction and engagement with mythic themes.

The artwork encouraged philosophical reflection and stimulated higher order thinking, as well as developing aspects of emotional intelligence. Children aged 5 years upward explored the poetry of the image, be it still or moving. The writing (and speaking) work, therefore, addressed primarily the generation and structuring of poetic ideas.

There were no previsit sessions for this case study. The work began with the pupils reclining on duvets in a side gallery to view two simultaneously projected Charwei Tsai films. In these, the artist wrote/painted mantras on large mirrors reflecting the sky and the ocean. Each pupil was then given a personal mirror to look at, to explore the notion of "reflection" in both its physical and metaphorical senses. By "reflecting" upon both the "inner" and "outer" world, the children could then invest their own experiences in making statements, assumptions, and suppositions about the character of the artist. This raised a series of questions designed to channel the pupils' imaginations into story and myth making:

Figure 3. "Dust on the Mirror": Interrogating abstract artworks to inspire poetry writing.

"What do we know?" (differentiated for younger children as "What can we see?"), "What do we *think* we know?" (differentiated as "What can we guess?"), and "What would we like to ask the artist/girl/woman in the film?" The potential stories or histories of the artist were then debated in small groups, supported by an adult, and shared among the whole class.

The session then moved physically from the "reflection" space into the wider gallery, surrounded by the other artists' abstract works. On the floor, rolls of Mylar (thick mirrored paper) were unscrolled. These replicated the sea and sky of Tsai's videos, and the children were invited to draw or write stories on the reflective surface, effectively adopting the mantle of the artist seen in the videos. This mark making exercise was intended to free up the "writer," unfettered by formal language, using the children's propensity to write and draw simultaneously. The unpressurized work was particularly important for unskilled writers or those with no discernible writing skills at all (due to age, disability, or lack of English). The mirrored writing surfaces, placed with sensitivity to the exhibition works, became *de facto* new, collaborative artworks on the gallery floor, increasing the pupil's

sense of involvement in, and ownership of, a cultural space they would not normally access.

At this point, as part of interventions discussing the problems of being a professional writer, participants discussed "blank page" syndrome. This demonstrated to the children that the issues they faced as writers were shared by adults as well, with the intention of raising self-esteem and confidence to tackle their writing tasks. Once again, speaking and listening to the stories and images that the pupils had committed to the "blank" mirror paper was an important developmental phase in the gallery session. The second "writer's issue" addressed was the challenge of accessing and developing *interesting* ideas. Responding to the array of images surrounding them on the gallery walls, the pupils were invited to extrapolate potential stories that they could see in the images (irrespective of the artists' original intentions). This was achieved though modeling the "what is possible" questions. The openness to interpretation of the abstract works, and lack of judgment in adult's responses to the children's ideas, were key in realizing their potential as story makers.

To collate and embed these responses to the imagery, the pupils were given A4 scaffolding grids on which they wrote down all the characters/emotions/sounds/senses/thoughts/conflicts that they felt were expressed in the artworks. The words or phrases they wrote were unencumbered by expectations of grammatical or spelling accuracy (which was explicitly put aside). Once these grids or word banks were filled out, Rumney modeled the writing of "Mykus" (a new haiku form in which the Japanese 5/7/5 *syllable* line structure is replaced by a more accessible 5/7/5 *word* structure), using the grids as source material. The children's writing had therefore been scaffolded very carefully, but the writing was fresh, experimental, and improvisatory. The final Myku writing exercise took place in the last 10 min of the 120-min session. This was achievable because of the depth of imaginative work, and the scaffolding, that led up to it.

> They gained a new way of thinking about art and writing through the writing strategies in the workshop . . . I found it particularly interesting their response to the installation. Having the space to reflect over that expanse of time is something largely missed from their ordinary, fast-paced timetable, and the pupils got a lot out of the experience. (Key Stage 3 teacher, Samworth Academy, Nottingham, age group 12-13)

Below is the example of Mykus written by children aged 7 to 11:

A cold misty night where

stray dogs and spirits roam all around

and the only sound is water

I was fighting in the

war with my best friends, but on

Table 1. Respondents' Attainment Levels Were Compared With the Two Previous Year's SATs Results.

Cohort	Involvement	Results
2009	Did not work with the project writer	60% of the class achieved Level 4 or above in writing (40% at Level 4, 20% at Level 5)
2010	Worked with the project writer in small interventions	65% children achieved Level 4 or above in writing (52% at Level 4, 13% at Level 5)
2011	Worked with the project writer over 2 terms and in the gallery	73% children achieved Level 4 or above in writing (43% at Level 4, 30% at Level 5)

Note. SAT = Standard Assessment Test.

the radio he died silently

I held the cross tightly.

"Lord save us." And then I ran.

Ran to save my country

Ashes floating down from war,

the salty tears of devastated children crying.

Fiery bombs, upset children thinking all is lost.

Findings

Attainment

The findings of the Write Here project are presented here in the context of previous data on pupils' attainment in writing, and based on a new dataset created as part of this research (see below). All 30 children from Year 6 (Mellers, 2011 cohort) were part of the project evaluation (Table 1). This core group of young learners evaluated the project through creative recall exercises, and drew up with the writer a list of the activities they had undertaken throughout the project. These activities were then grouped into a simple list form with options to indicate (from 1 to 10) how effective the children had found them.

The medium term benefits of the study are attested by the effect on SATs levels after a year. It is impossible, however, to determine the longer term benefits (i.e., beyond 2 years) due to the participating cohort being lost to a diverse secondary system once they leave primary school. Although no claim for this improvement in terms of attainment can be made for the project in isolation from other strategies used in the school, staff across the school indicated that the Write Here project was hugely influential on attainment (particularly by those struggling with writing), because of its impact on pupil motivation and engagement.

The Write Here project and strategies . . . have had a huge impact on the writing attainment of children over the last two years [with]a dramatic increase in the number of children achieving Level 4 or above. (Primary Literacy Coordinator)

In addition to above, a target group of six pupils was identified, to analyze the more subtle *sub*levels attained by the children. Three out of six pupils demonstrated accelerated progress, exceeding teacher expectations. These three reflect a wide range of abilities and confidence as writers.

I feel really confident at writing stories than I did before . . . I can place a lot of punctuation with writing before and I'm not really good at SATs but getting higher at the level. It makes me feel good about myself. (Pupil, Mellers)

Three other pupils also met expectations; one was high ability technically, but poor in terms of actual content, which nevertheless improved; the other had both Special Needs and English as a second language, therefore their "average" progress was regarded as "very good" for a child with this particular learning needs. The third pupil, a refugee with no English on arrival, made a five sublevels increase in a year.

The teacher assessments for the children's work indicate that all these six pupils made "very good progress" in writing skills and imaginative content through the project, and that this is reflected in their attainment. Since the study was conducted, there has been a change in the way "progress" is measured in primary schools. The idea of "levels and sublevels" attained across a child's lifetime in primary school has been abandoned and replaced with a more "age appropriate" approach. When the project data were collected, however, the old "levels" system of progress measurement indicated that greater than expected progress had been made, as indicated in the specific examples cited.

Engagement With the Art Gallery

During the project, teacher evaluations attested to the effectiveness of the gallery-based work in motivating children to speak and write, irrespective of their age:

Pupils began to develop their own narratives for the paintings through discussion . . . their individual work enabled them to focus on their language choices. (Year 8 Teacher)

At the heart of the pedagogy was play, stillness, reflection, and nonobjective led learning.

[This was] a new way of thinking about art and writing, [giving] a sense of ownership of their work, [and offering] the use of reflection (both kinds!) to build thinking skills and the space to create. (Year 8 Teacher)

Of the 28 lead teachers who attended, two found the approach challenging because they had expectations that children would be "doing more writing" to develop their literacy. The

children's imaginative, passionate, and unusual follow-up writing subsequently submitted to the gallery by these teachers attested to the powerful motivation and inspiration achieved by the Write Here methodology.

Motivation

Thirty children from Year 5 (Mellers, 2011 cohort) scored each activity in the Write Here project out of 10 (Figure 4). The average scores for most activities are high, demonstrating that the work motivated the children and offered a range of activities that appealed to all abilities. The lowest average scores are given to some of the more technical aspects of the work, such as writing backward. However, teacher observations indicate that some of the children were marking these aspects down because they were *difficult*, rather than because they were *unhelpful*, and that these strategies were useful to the whole group, however unusual and challenging.

Gallery Work: Legacy Project

After the main Write Here project ended, 700 Key Stage 2 pupils from inner city Nottingham schools have visited the gallery (between January 2012 and April 2014), to take part in the legacy program of literacy workshops. These workshops have been delivered in the gallery by 28 graduate and undergraduate volunteers, who have been mentored and trained in cascade fashion by the original research team. Faced with competition for scarce time and resources in schools, the literacy work has proved to be an effective magnet to bring pupils into the gallery. Teachers have been able to make a pragmatic choice to engage with both the "nuts and bolts" of writing and with a cultural site in one visit.

It was a great introduction to how interesting a gallery can be and how art can be used to develop literacy skills. . . . A great opportunity for a real writing experience to further develop the literacy experience. . . . [It] Enthused students, many of whom returned with family and friends in order to share their experiences, and [it was] a great opportunity to see important works of art that I believe they will appreciate even more as they grow up. (Primary Arts Coordinator/Year 6 Teacher)

Conclusion

From September 2014, children as young as 4 years old will be expected to be able to write a sentence by the time they finish their foundation stage year. Some children are able to do this, but many still need time to play first. The New National Curriculum states that all children will achieve expected levels, regardless of special educational needs. This will seriously affect many vulnerable children, and it is not clear how this will raise standards throughout the education system. The Write Here project demonstrated that the teaching of writing skills should not be undertaken simply for their own sake, or solely for utilitarian purposes. Participating pupils regarded "pointless" writing as demotivating, and this
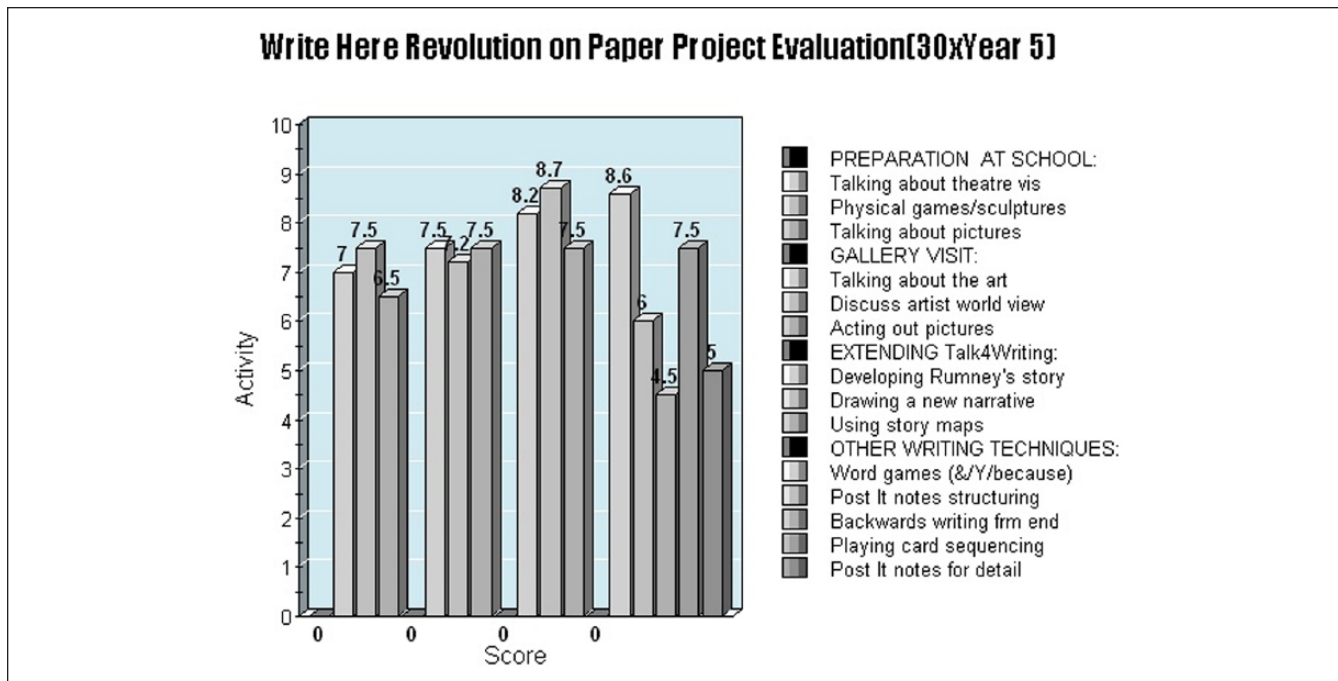
Figure 4. Revolution on Paper exhibition: End of project evaluation by 30 Year 5 pupils (aged 9-10).

attitude affects their attainment. The project demonstrated how effectively an art gallery could be used to enable children, of all ages, to make a personal connection to art, talk about it, be motivated to write about it, and support that writing with specific skills acquisition. The project scaffolded a process of ownership for the children, demystifying the writing process, and demonstrating to pupils that they are not alone in struggling to express themselves.

This work, in both the art gallery and the classroom, led to a series of impacts. First, children developed (a) a significant improvement in literacy attainment, especially in sublevels, and (b) increasing confidence to express themselves in writing, irrespective of their "ability." The children no longer saw "writing" as "work." Second, professional writers were enabled to achieve a greater understanding of their potential to influence young writers, whereas student writers acquired important workplace skills and knowledge (public speaking, presentation, teamwork), which affected their abilities to foster writing and others in the future. In the longer term, the study demonstrated impact in embedding experiential learning strategies developed by the research team, and subsequently implemented by teachers into the school curriculum. The study evidenced the importance of creative, playful, multimodal activities in fostering both motivation and achievement in children's writing. It also indicated what a powerful site for learning an art gallery can be, due to the possibilities for individual interpretation and empathy that visual art can offer the young writer. At the same time, the study also acknowledges that formal structures can be used intelligently and creatively to liberate pupils' imaginations,

and consequently enable them to express themselves coherently. Paradoxically, to achieve what many might consider to be a "prosaic" goal—the raising of attainment—this work drew on the most "poetic" of ideas—the practice of playing with form to discover meaning. This process enabled a fundamental principle underpinning the work, namely, that young people have something important to communicate about their experience of the world, and that "seeing" things and "doing" things have a vital role in enabling them to give witness to their lives through the written and spoken word.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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