

Writers and Teachers Conference, 2nd July 2016 at Goldsmiths, University of London

Keynote Speech by Michael Rosen

Anyone taking stock of education and language-use could easily come to the conclusion that there are two quite distinct categories:

- i) Writing
 - ii) Writing that pupils do in schools.
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- i) Writing is what takes place in society and includes any or all of the following, and much more besides: shop names, novels, film scripts, joke books, advertisements, debt notices, notes for a talk at a teachers' conference on writing at Goldsmiths college, science text books, sports reports, political manifestos, recipes, song lyrics, flat pack furniture assembly instructions, estate agents' descriptions of houses and flats, captions underneath photographs, a book of nursery rhymes, newspapers, film sub-titles, online web content, - and so on.

One way to think of this kind of writing is that it was nearly all written or published with audiences in mind. In some ways, and in many of the examples I've just given, this 'audience-in-mind' is much more important than knowing who the author is. It's almost as if the purpose is the writing and the writing is the purpose.

- ii) Writing in schools is often - not always - very different from this. A good deal of it has a life-cycle that goes like this: a task is set by the teacher, the pupil writes the task by hand in an exercise book, the exercise book passes to the teacher who makes marks on it and passes it back to the pupil.

Another specialised but very important part of writing in education has a life-cycle like this: a central government-approved agency produces a test which has gaps in it that need filling up and/or demands prescribed tasks. The pupil fills in the gaps or does the task which is returned to markers and never seen again.

This model of writing sometimes involves mock filling in, or pre-mock filling...

In many schools - thank goodness - there are other life cycles of a very different kind - much more like writing in society: old and new - printed school magazines and anthologies, school blogs, inter-school blogs, wall magazines, performances and events which pupils write special things for...

In some schools, teachers themselves re-configure themselves as writers - that is writing things other than school reports and write-ups of discipline procedures.

Meanwhile, schools - teachers and administrators - do turn out a good deal of category 1 writing - writing in society - in terms of letters home to parents, mission statements, slogans that go up on walls ('Believe and achieve'; 'Aspire and inspire'), helpful directives also on walls like 'Exit here', names of classes and classrooms, posters and the like - all writing for a purpose with audiences in mind.

Now, let's focus on the task-oriented kind of writing, which is the backbone of most schooling from the initial stages of literacy through to the end of A-level.

Can we give ourselves a clear picture of what is it actually for?

Broadly speaking, the job being done here is learning how to be literate and more specifically to be literate in some specific ways. Though I've said 'being literate broadly speaking', perhaps there is no such thing as being literate in a broad way, and there is only being literate in specific ways. So, for example, I'm literate in writing certain kinds of poem, certain kinds of radio script, certain kinds of jokes, notes for talks for conferences on writing at Goldsmiths - but not at all literate in writing in Hungarian, not literate in writing instructions on how to do calculus or knitting, not literate in the precepts of the Greek Orthodox Church. I can't write about those things, or even put together sentences or passages of writing or even little bits that make any kind of sense. I am not broadly or generally literate. I am specifically literate.

This way of thinking about literacy goes beyond the idea that literacy is simply a set of tools which you take up and use and apply for any old bit of writing. Rather, it suggests that every bit of literacy work you do requires a sense of purpose and audience so that you know what you're doing and why.

Let's try it: you are all what would be described usually in a traditional way 'literate', but writing outside of your experience is not easy, yet we ask children to do it a great deal of the time. Let's see what it feels like. Here's a task, for you - a group of people, who I'm going to guess, don't spend a lot of time betting or betting on football: come up with a slogan, no longer than four words, which will go on a poster to encourage you to bet on this evening's football match. (You can have a paragraph elsewhere saying who's playing who and what the odds are....you don't have to write that.) Just the slogan please.

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And now this one, much easier for most of us, I think:

a two-word or three-word notice telling people that they can't do something in this place: you can decide what it is they can't do: not consume certain things, not do things with certain parts of their body - on their own or with others, not think or say certain things...

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Now let's think how you came up with these instructions. One key aspect of it is that you hired in your head (and by talking to the person next to you) what we can call a repertoire or hoard of the many - perhaps thousands of encounters you've had in the past with such notices. At some level of consciousness, these came into your mind and you used them as some kind of template to create new ones.

The other key aspect was your experience of life: 'what you know' and we must never forget that 'what you know' can be where writing starts. I'll return to that.

When we say 'writing for purpose or audience' one way we do this is to beg, borrow or steal from examples in our heads, and then wrote for a purpose or audience - using our experience ('what we

know'). It's as if 'purpose or audience' is inscribed in some kind of hidden way, almost secret way on different bits of the hoard in our heads.

This is the action of what has been called 'intertextuality'.

Not that the different parts of our intertextual repertoires are watertight and separated off from each other. The phrase 'no smoking' sits in my head alongside the little notice that the tailor of Gloucester reads in Beatrix Potter's book which says, 'No more twist'. Same structure but it's not an instruction, it's a statement of fact. An account of what electricity does could be: let's say, how to set up an electric circuit; or it could be a partly fictionalised account of Michael Faraday in around 1810, playing around with coins and bits of salty wet paper at the back of a bookshop in Blandford street near Marylebone station.

Why I will put one or the other in front of you will depend very much on who I think is going to read it, why, when and where. Or it could be my experience of electricity: the electric shock I had when I mucked around with the electric lamp next to my bed when I was ill. Or the games I used to play with my friend Mart when we camped on farms when we were kids: we used to see who could hold an electric fence the longest. Not easy.

All these ways of talking and writing could come under the heading of 'getting to know about electricity' but are very different kinds of talking, writing and thinking. Being rigid about genre as a means of conveying science, concepts or abstract knowledge is not necessarily helpful either.

Ultimately, the job of me passing on to you how you can make electricity work for you might be done by any or all of these methods. There isn't a single genre that says, there is only one way to tell you how to make electricity work.

But let's get back to school.

There's a very strong aspect of what goes on in school that I've left out.

That is: all pupils - not matter the age - aren't complete writers. They are apprentices and as part of that apprenticeship everything they write is provisional, a rehearsal, part of becoming.

In a way, this applies to all writing. A bit of writing doesn't really end at the point that we conventionally regard as 'the end'. It is read and responded to by readers who take bits of it with them into life and into their other reading. One of those readers is the writer: the first reader. And as such takes that bit of writing with them into life and their next bit of writing. That's the positive side of this business of writing in schools being provisional and a rehearsal. It's provisional as regards its meaning and how it will be used by readers at a later stage. I'll come back to more in a moment.

The negative side of the apprenticeship idea is that it means - where this applies - that if it's apprenticeship it can mean that it's never for real. Most of it might be done simply to fit those highly specific requirements we are all familiar with, the recount, the critical essay, the descriptive piece, the persuasive writing, all of which end up in that strange lonely little sump, the exercise book. What's more, for much of the time, the writer (the pupil) may well have very little real choice in what to write about.

And, as we know, it now comes in many circumstances encoded into rules called 'expected levels'.

Curiously and amazingly, the really crucial part of these expectations from the DfE include such instructions as 'writing using semi-colons', 'fronted adverbials' and 'embedded relative clauses'.

At Key Stage 2, for example, someone somewhere has devised a set of nigh-on biblical commandments which are gauges for what constitutes good writing and they marginalize or exclude teachers' qualitative comments about texture, effect and feeling - like these: "this piece of writing made the class laugh". Or: "it worked brilliantly for a sketch at the end-of-term show. We all loved it." Or: "it told the story of our trip to the Tower of London, using dialogue - what was being said on the day and that made the piece more lively to read". Or, "I enjoyed your quoting of announcements and notices that you had observed, and the varied flip-flopping between accounts of what you could see around you and accounts of how you were feeling - varied points of view in writing is good!" ; "I liked your clever use of a catch-phrase, that cropped up several times through the piece with an unexpected pay-off at the end. That was a surprise and surprise is a good thing in writing, because it makes us sit up and think" ; "I liked it the way you used an occasional - not too many! - rhetorical question, which ensured that the reader (me) was engaged and active in thinking, how do I answer that question?" ; "I liked the way you used an approach which appeared to be revealing what happened whilst at the same time withholding information so that I was curious - at times mystified but always want to know what was going to happen next" ; "I liked the sudden moment of pathos, sadness, that was in complete contrast to the light tone being used elsewhere - contrast works well in writing usually" ; "I enjoyed the fact that you were very restrained in your use of adjectives and adverbs so that I didn't get a sense that you were straining for effect. I think this resulted in that the writing felt as if it unfolded easily and fluently" ; "there were some opinions which engaged me with wondering whether this really had been a sensible trip to do or not."

A few thousand years of literary criticism does give us some ways of assembling criteria that are qualitative and personal, which help us enjoy a piece of writing and even to help us find out if we enjoy any piece of writing no matter how functional, figurative, factual or fictional. Reducing these to features of sentence grammar is an insult to our intelligence and indeed to writing itself - if that's possible!

So I am going to suggest here that one of our jobs today is to remind ourselves that we can - and of course many of you do - put together much more valuable criteria for what makes good writing. One way to find out or become familiar with or even to remind ourselves of the value of these criteria is to write. There is a strong tradition in the room - whether coming from Goldsmiths with the Writer-Teacher qualification run by Vicky McLeroy or with the teacher-writer work coming from Simon Wrigley and colleagues.

Underlying this work, is a principle. What we ask others to do, we should at the very least give a go at it ourselves. In so doing, we may well find out what's easy, what's hard, what's possible, what's not possible, what parts of the process of starting, carrying on and finishing have their own particular problems, what does it feel like to share what you write, what does it feel like to deliberately not share what you write - whether, when it comes to sharing, we do it through publication or performance, and finally what does it feel to hear what others say about what you write?

And much more.

But let's wind back to that sense of apprenticeship. So far, I've drawn attention to the snag of treating everything that pupils write as provisional. I could add:

that it gives off a signal to pupils that everything they write doesn't really matter very much; if it all ends up tucked away in exercise books and is never shared, then there is a way of viewing this as saying that your peers don't matter very much either. That is, there is not much point in showing them, because what do they know, eh? And of course when it's their work, that applies to you! There's a process of reinforcement going on here, where what you write doesn't matter to me, and what I write doesn't matter to you.

Apart from anything else, this is a lost opportunity for the process of 'audience-affecting-writing' to kick in.

But are there ways in which this position of writing in schools as an 'apprenticeship' can be harnessed?

1. If we know we are apprentices when we write, we can at the moment of writing take a burden off ourselves that the surface features of writing- letter formation, spelling, punctuation has to be correct. And I could add to that: it can also take away the burden that at the moment of writing - before edit or re-draft - that conformity with standard English has to be 100% correct.
2. If we know we are apprentices when we write, we can introduce the sense that the act of writing is an experiment - a real experiment in which we do not know for certain what the outcome is - whether that's at the level of what to include, exclude, conclude or others.
3. To expand that: if we don't know what the outcome is, then part of the job of writing is to discover what that outcome is, - which can be - first finding out what you the writer thinks of what you're writing, and secondly finding out how others react to it. Writing can be a way of finding out what I think about something.
4. Again, if it's an experiment, and you know it's an experiment, rather than a series of small acts of obedience, then it's almost inevitable that you will make discoveries for yourself as you write, or I should say, 'write-read-write-read' as you go along...and so on.
5. Apprenticeship accepts the idea that part of the process here is discovering and learning the principles of writing standard English. But I don't want to leave that hanging in the air.

First of all: standard English is not an unchanging, universal. It is, like all language-uses, an evolving changing form. In my lifetime, newspapers for example have changed many of the style guides that govern presentation. As a child I was told over and over again that you can't use contractions in standard English, no 'don't' 'can't, 'haven't' and the like. These are now permitted. (Digression: who decided that? Government? A minister in the Education department? Oxford University of Press? No, it just evolved.)

In fact, there isn't one standard English: within one newspaper or across several newspapers, within one biography or across several kinds of biography, there are different kinds of standard English at work, different kinds of formality, if you like. These differences can be investigated as part of learning what Standard English is like - particularly by secondary level students.

Secondly, continuous prose is not the only form of written English. We are surrounded with other forms: ads, signs, notices, newspaper headlines, emails, texts, tweets, online messaging, song

lyrics, film scripts, many different kinds of tv scripts, sub-titles on films, dialogue in novels, many, many types of poetry, drama and so on. These are all vital ways of expressing ideas for each other about what we know, imagine or want to explain.

But - with these provisos and accepting the idea that part of the job of schools - some say, the main job of schools - is to pass on the ability for all pupils to leave school being able to write continuous prose in standard English, an aspect of apprenticeship might be important: practice.

So, we learn how to speak by being immersed in it from the day we're born till the day we die. Of course there are some people who don't learn, across a wide range of people, and various kinds of help or getting round or substitutes come into play.

But apart from a tiny few, we don't by and large lead lives immersed in writing to anywhere near the same extent. Funnily enough, amongst the most immersed are teenagers texting each other, or manic tweeters and Facebook posters like me.

For the rest, it might be best to think of learning to write as something that we do all our lives. There'll always be a kind of writing - even in our own language - that we can't read very easily, can't understand, and so definitely can't write. In fact, there may well be vast amounts of writing that you or I can't do or don't do and like any of us, need plenty of practice - without fear of failure - to be able to have a shot at it.

I keep saying the word 'practice'.

As we know, that can mean, according to the DfE, doing exercises: repeating certain structures over and over again, writing and re-writing single words, and - as is now in place - learning the explicit names, processes and functions of formal sentence grammar from the age of 5.

To date, there is no evidence that any of this actually does help you produce continuous prose, that goes beyond simply repeating certain structures like 'expanded noun phrases' as if they are self-evidently good. If you start to use even simple words of criticism - like: 'interesting', 'varied', 'intriguing', 'exciting', 'surprising' as criteria then it's hard to see how the exercise and structure approach can or will do the job.

Fundamentally, that's because writing is a specific form of ordering experience. It's not simply or only a specific form of being a specific form. Writing is not just a means of being writing. It is always, as I've said, 'about something' and for audiences.

It has meaning and meaning matters.

It's even odd to be saying this. In our real lives, we know that. That's why we pick up a magazine in the doctor's waiting room or read what the passport form says.

So, it's become controversial to be talking about meaning when talking about writing in schools. I'm of the view that we should constantly run a meaning-monitor in our heads when we work with children and young people. Am I doing this bit of writing because we in the room are interested in meaning? Or am I doing this bit of writing UNinterested in meaning?

And meaning is the great motivator. Writing or reading for meaning is what generates doing more writing. Yes, you can get away with doing a few meaning-less exercises - particularly if you

surround them with enough sticks and carrots. But, as I say, whether that gets you to the point at which you can produce continuous prose that interests anyone, or is useful for anyone is another matter.

(In passing, I would say that the last thirty years in the teaching of writing has seen a slow but steady move away from thinking of writing as a means of conveying meaning and towards an idea of it being a set of models and procedures which need to be adopted in a mechanical way in order to produce what is called 'good writing'. It has become more important to follow these instructions than to become confident about saying what you mean in writing. I think this approach over the last thirty years has come to dominate the teaching of reading, comprehension (without interpretation), overly rigid genre-writing, formal grammar as a means of constructing sentences and continuous prose and so on.)

But there's something else here. I spoke about varieties of written English. What if, by spending time doing some of these, let's say, writing for performance, free writing, writing about what I know, writing about what I feel, song-writing, poetry - we learn that writing is useful for saying different things in different ways; and that sometimes these different kinds of writing feel easier or more exciting or say more to us than others; and that if we spend time doing these, it does feed into other kinds of writing, including continuous prose in standard English?

Those are questions, not statements. They're up for investigating or challenging.

Either way, today is an experiment in writing for meaning - using the spirit and intention of doing what writers do in society.

I've often said that it's significant that when governments decide how writing should be taught and what kind of writing should be taught - and even, sadly, when good people construct text books on how to teach writing - almost always, people who write for a living, writers, authors are excluded from the conversation.

Now it may well be that most writers don't know much about teaching. So, knowing how to write may not slot easily into a subject called 'how to teach writing'. On the other hand, all teachers have to teach writing but not all of them have access to people who write for a living whether that's in real life, online, in curriculum materials or even, as I've said, in textbooks.

So what we're doing today is seeing what happens when we try to bridge that gap or indeed many intriguing and surprising gaps. As writers or teachers or as teaching-writers or as writing-teachers or as all four, we're not in competition with each other. Today is about experimenting and discussing.