

Finding the joy in reading and writing: teaching literacy in PRUs

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In this article Helen Watt and Carol Tribe describe how they found ways to convince their reluctant students in PRUs that reading and writing could be pleasurable and rewarding.

Helen Watt and Carol Tribe teach in Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) in Kent for students in key stage 3 upwards. From June 2013 until July 2014 they participated in the Kent Literacy Project, an initiative funded by Kent Local Education Authority in partnership with the University of Greenwich and various local secondary schools and Pupil Referral Units, both large and small. The project was led by Andrew Lambirth and Susanna Steele, from the Faculty of Education and Health.

Learning from a primary literacy initiative

Helen Watt: At first glance, I have to confess that the Kent Literacy Project appeared to be irrelevant to me. I was the only English teacher in a small PRU in Kent. What could I possibly learn from a primary school based teaching initiative? However, the key to my involvement was a small group of very reluctant writers within my amalgamated key stage 3 class and, to be honest, any help to try and switch them on to literacy was gratefully received.

As pupils may attend PRUs for relatively short periods of time, before going back to mainstream, they can often be severely lacking in self-confidence and encouraging them to try new things can sometimes prove a challenge.

Carol: Most of the Greenwich project work I did was with a small group of Year 8 pupils of mixed ability. The group changed over the course of the year as some pupils came and went.

Writing without restrictions

Carol and Helen both introduced writing journals (Graham & Johnson 2003). The students were each given an exercise book and were invited to customise them by decorating the covers with photographs from magazines. This provided a way of allowing them to display something about themselves as individuals and encouraged talk about home

interests and passions. Helen and Carol then invited the students to write whatever they pleased in their journals, assuring them that they would not be marking their work and they would only read the journals with the students' permission.

Helen: As a teacher, it was almost unthinkable to allow students to write in class without restrictions, guidance or monitoring and it did take a while for us to get used to this concept. However, they did take to the idea and it was exciting to see one of the reluctant boy writers actually ask to write in his journal on more than one occasion. We often took inspiration from the lessons or stories we had studied that week with topics such as 'what is happiness to you?' following a topic that involved an article on 'happiness lessons' in school or 'where would you rather be right now?' following a lesson on settings. But there was no obligation to use these ideas, and a bank of possibilities were listed and glued onto the inside cover of their writing books if they were stuck for ideas. The rule was: there were no rules. They could write about absolutely anything and in any format. This free-rein approach led to some truly insightful and personal entries which some of the students allowed me to read.

Carol: On first joining us, Richard used to complain about every simple writing task, needing much encouragement to write 'two more lines' or 'just a few more words'. By the end of the year he was writing with enthusiasm and with no complaints. Simon was already a reasonably competent writer but without too much motivation to develop a piece – he was too concerned to finish as quickly as possible.

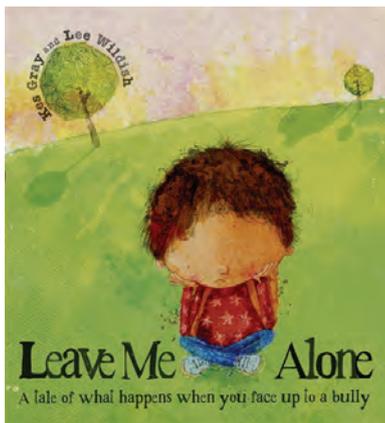
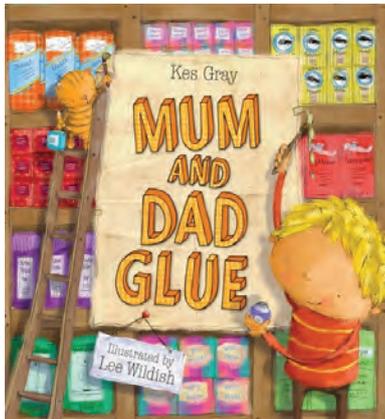
The excitement and enthusiasm with which these two boys embraced the whole idea of the writing journals in which they could write whatever they liked, knowing that it would remain 'private', was a joy to witness. 'Private'

became a key word for them and I had to respect it, even though I suspected that, at times, the contents might be inappropriate! We tied the small stack of journals with a golden ribbon – our privacy ribbon – a sign reminding everyone of the private nature of these books. My small group of pupils customised the front covers with vigorous enthusiasm. In addition to some writing time in lessons, they also frequently rushed to collect them during lunch or break times in order to continue. How rewarding it was to see Sue, a Year 8 pupil (level 2 in English) with poor writing skills, following the lead of the boys in wanting to write in her journal for the first time. That lunchtime she proudly informed me on my arrival that she had ‘written something in her journal’ and that I ‘could read it’ if I liked.

In addition to introducing writing journals, Helen and Carol also wanted the students to hear stories read and told aloud.

Exploring big issues through picture books

Carol: I had always included a great deal of reading aloud in my classes, attempting to liven the delivery with a range of voices and accents, but before this project I had never considered using picture books with my secondary pupils, unless specifically when writing our own children’s story. The simple pleasure of being read to was highlighted at each of our Kent project sessions when Andrew Lambirth would delight us by reading from a seemingly vast collection of picture books. I devoted one lesson a week to reading activities, with the aim of promoting not just a love of reading for the individual, but a real enjoyment of shared storytelling. I began each of these lessons by reading a picture book aloud; they are ideal for being able



to tell the whole story in one sitting. I hoped to use these books as a hook back to a time when my pupils enjoyed books – a time before the land of secondary school where books became ‘boring’ and reading became something to be endured for these students. Sitting on the floor of the public library, I discovered a wealth of stories so pertinent to the experience of many of my own students: bullying, depression, family break-up, the ease and thoughtlessness with which adults and peers can crush self-esteem and fragile egos. Amazingly, I discovered picture books tackling these big issues.

Once Upon an Ordinary School Day - Colin McNaughton and Satoshi Kitamura

I loved this one about an eccentric and imaginative teacher who comes and makes writing fun!

Leave Me Alone - Kes Gray and Lee Wildish

About bullying.

Mum and Dad Glue - Kes Gray and Lee Wildish

About divorce.

Wild about Books - Judy Sierra and Marc Brown

The mobile library comes to town and all the animals get really excited about books!

Oi Get Off Our Train - John Burningham

Inclusion/exclusion.

Storytelling into writing

Helen: Oral stories are fun to learn and even more fun to deliver. The idea of oral storytelling isn’t one that I’ve used a lot in the secondary setting and getting silly in front of a bunch of judgemental teenagers isn’t always as appetising as it would necessarily be to primary school teachers perhaps, but I went with it. The concept was sound: tell the story first and get the pupils to list the key events in the story (Grainger, Gooch & Lambirth 2004). In this case I used ‘story hands’. I printed out the outline of a hand and asked the students to use a finger for each event, writing and/or drawing what had happened in the story.



I used a story called *The Raja’s Big Ears* that we heard in one of the project sessions. The students used their story hands to help them remember the narrative.

I asked the students to retell their selected event, embellishing as they saw fit, three times to three different partners. The versions they told to each other orally changed subtly with each re-telling, with more detail being added, bits that didn’t work being dropped and so on. It allowed them time to process the information they wanted to include in their section before going to the writing stage and giving them a way into the story and the art of storytelling. Once they had told their story three times I then asked them to write it down as they had told it.

The end result was a collection of individual stories that each pupil could call their own. The resulting written drafts were perhaps not the most accurate in technical terms but we can sometimes neglect the need to teach writing as a process. The secretarial elements of writing could wait until the work needed to be presented to real readers. The drafts produced were of a superior quality to their normal creative writing, having cultivated a real ownership of the story. In fact, this approach was so successful; I have used it in other creative writing opportunities and with similar success.

Carol: I also told traditional stories without text, which we followed with oral storytelling activities. One activity involved the pupils writing three sentences from the perspective of a person or object from the story; each person's final sentence must include the object that the next student is writing about.

Simon's three sentences based on *The Rajah's Ears* showed a clear sense of fun and engagement with the story:

Once upon a time there was a very rich, wise Rajah. He had a big secret though; he had huge elephant sized ears. To hide them he had a collection of hats that included a police hat, a French hat, a Scottish hat, a Mexican hat, a cap, a helmet, a turban and a prison cap.

By putting all the sentences together the class had produced their own alternative version of the story. In response to hearing this tale, my pupils asked if they could write their own story. How could I refuse? I ruled, however, that it must be in the same genre - in the style of a legend. Simon wrote his story, developing it like no other piece he had written, and was able to demonstrate a sensitive awareness of audience and genre:

In the Lost Land of Riigo-Fallo there lived a brave and noble goblin warrior named Ouskavar. Ouskavar had green skin with black hair to his shoulders. He wore a brown sleeveless tunic and a decorative collar. At this time Ouskavar was exploring and adventuring with his trusty black unicorn Gloaming and he happened to pass a little gnome village. A gnome is a distant relative to the dwarf, only dwarfs live underground and the gnomes live above it...

... 'The truth is,' the mayor confessed, 'I lost it!'

'What was the invention anyway?' Gloaming asked.

'It was an orb of finding,' the inventor whimpered.

'If only we had one!' Gloaming sulked.

This writing provided a vehicle for his eccentric sense of humour and whilst Simon was working generally at level 4A/5C in English, his final story was a good level 6.

Developing positive attitudes

Helen: The work that I have introduced to my class of key stage 3 students has reminded me that pupils feeling ownership of their own learning can often lead to significantly improved quality of work and commitment to its completion. The positive attitudes arising from the sessions I have described have impacted upon the pupils' attitudes to learning in other areas of literacy and improved grades are evident. I'm not suggesting that the sole catalyst has been the new ownership they have felt over some of their work, but it has definitely been a significant contributory factor and on a personal and professional level, I've found this very satisfying.

Carol: What a joy it is for any English teacher to be able to celebrate individuality and encourage those first tentative steps on a writing journey.

Conclusion

The activities that Helen and Carol introduced were inspired by practices that primary teachers often use, yet what became evident was the universality of many of the reading and writing initiatives they tried. Reading and writing was acknowledged as being important to the students as a way to express themselves. Helen and Carol demonstrated to the students how reading and writing could be challenging, engaging and satisfying when applied to the students' interests, talents and passions.

References

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