Writers-in-the-Schools in Britain

Mavericks and the Curriculum

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It may surprise American audiences to learn that in Great Britain (the nation of Shakespeare, Keats, and Browning) the relationship between education and creative writing has been an uneasy marriage. In higher education, creative writing programmes in Britain were founded some 20-odd years after the Iowa Writers Workshop and the New School Writing Program. To this day, creative writing programmes at the university level have to fight for their place in the humanities: most remain distinct from the English Literature departments. One M.F.A. programme recently found itself outcast along with courses on Sexually Transmitted Diseases. The struggle to make creative writing a part of the curriculum extends to the secondary school level, where, despite every research report and recommendation, creativity is still squeezed out in favour of things which are easier to assess.

Organizations like Teachers & Writers Collaborative in New York and NAWE (the National Association of Writers in Education) in Britain emerge as mavericks, determined to ensure that creativity is alive and kicking at the heart of our schools. Poet Laureate Andrew Motion has spoken eloquently about the necessity for such organizations:

> The need to protect space for the imaginative growth of children is as great as ever. Greater than ever, maybe. By making writing a central part of their school experience, we [at NAWE] offer pupils the chance to make heartening discoveries of themselves, and to deepen and diversify their connection with the world. If they produce important works of art, we shall all be grateful. If they don't, we'll still be grateful: they'll have learned what it is to be educated in the round.[1]

In the very same speech, Motion noted that "so much has changed in English teaching over the past 40-odd years." In order to understand the impact of NAWE's writers-in-the-schools programmes in Britain, I would like to discuss (briefly) some of the changes in the curriculum to which Motion refers.

The "National Curriculum" as such was only introduced into schools in 1989. The aim was to "provide teachers with clear objectives for their teaching; children with identifiable targets for their learning; parents with accurate, accessible information about what their children can be expected to know, understand and be able to do, and what they actually achieve." It was deeply unpopular, not least with those teachers who valued their own "maverick" tendencies. But the main reason for resentment probably lay in the terminology, the all-pervasive metaphor of "accountancy" which dominated Margaret Thatcher's political rule, and is still with us today.

A standardized curriculum was really inevitable though, following the earlier replacement of the two-tier system of Grammar Schools and Secondary Moderns with the more egalitarian Comprehensive Schools—open to everyone. It was a logical step towards equal educational opportunities, combined with a drive to raise overall standards. But the emphasis seemed to be on "attainment targets," an obsession which has, if anything, become worse over the succeeding decades. League tables of schools' results, drawn from testing pupils in almost every year, are now published regularly in the national press.

Superficially, at least, the basic structure of public examinations has changed relatively little. Soon after the Comprehensive revolution, the two-tier system of O-levels and CSEs gave way to a single exam, the GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education)—and not without accusations of "dumbing down." An average of ten subjects are studied and examined at around age sixteen. After this, either in the school 6th form or at a 6th form college, those who choose to continue their studies opt for three or four subjects at A-level (Advanced) standard. Typically, you need three good A-level passes to get into the universities with the more established reputations. (Oxford and Cambridge, still anachronistic in a number of ways, are the only universities to set their own exams.)

The "dumbing down" is open to debate. Personally, I feel the main criticism should be pointed at the over-riding focus on exam technique, fuelled of course by the league-table mentality. In this environment, it is both vital and frustratingly difficult to make time for "creative play" as Motion advocates.[2] Perhaps the ultimate frustration is to see some teachers tick off the writer's visit as yet another recommended activity achieved.

The National Curriculum has also been criticized for recommending a reading list that featured writers who were all white, male, and dead. This has improved hugely over recent years, and there is now much less of a gap between the recommended canon and the writers who might actually pay a visit in person. Some of our NAWE writers' poetry is even featured on the GCSE. (I'm not sure that a contemporary American poet would appear on the American AP English exam.) The gap that does exist is more one of approach. A famous writer, when introducing himself at a recent school visit, received what he considered to be recognition of the worst type: "We know you, we do you in the Literacy Hour."

The Literacy Strategy—a rigorous framework which sets out to ensure that all pupils achieve basic standards—is the most recent and controversial development within English teaching. Ask pupils what they need for good writing and they will answer: "Full stops, capital letters, sentences, adjectives." The

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Strategy does seem to have had success in raising overall competence, but possibly at the expense of encouraging reading and writing as enjoyable activities. You don't find the word "enjoyment" in any Strategy document.

You *do* however find countless references to what writers are uniquely well-equipped to deliver: "experiment with figurative language in conveying a sense of character and setting"; "experiment with presenting similar material in different forms and styles"; "develop an imaginative or unusual treatment of familiar material or established conventions"; etc. And so NAWE finds itself engaged with English teaching on a variety of levels. The long maverick tradition carries on—a role which writers are always ready to fulfil—but there are now more curriculum-based reasons why writers should be involved in the classroom. Some writers are understandably less willing to be "used" in this way. It is NAWE's job to negotiate this territory and ensure that writers and teachers enjoy (yes, enjoy) a fruitful working relationship that makes a real difference to the pupils.

It was for this reason that NAWE was founded, some ten years ago. The stated mission was to open up a dialogue between teachers, writers, and literary organizations, and to enable them to share good practice. NAWE promotes the educational ideals (and iconoclast ideas) of writers, and at the same time encourages writers to learn how to teach with an eye to the curriculum, to become skilled in dealing with classroom dynamics. We publish a magazine, *Writing in Education*, featuring articles on critical issues and workshop techniques, and provide our members with regular email updates.

But we are not just a virtual organization. An important part of our programme involves organizing conferences at which our members can share their ideas and workshop techniques. We have around 700 members, of which the great majority are writers, but there are also school teachers, librarians, and those working in higher education, arts administration, even health care. The conferences have a practical rather than an academic bias. NAWE's conferences are hugely valued by those who attend as a testing ground for new ideas and as a means of keeping well-informed of other writers' innovations in the classroom, sampling them first hand, as a pupil would. Britain is, of course, a relatively small group of islands, so members find it relatively easy to attend these events, wherever they are based.

NAWE's work has been met with increasing enthusiasm by students and teachers. Initially, of course, there was a nervousness amongst teachers, who were understandably keen for the writer to have "success" in producing creative writing with their pupils. They tended to hand-pick their "better" pupils to work with the writer. Gradually, however, the teachers began to realize that we could get some of the best work from the pupils who weren't seen as particularly gifted. Indeed, it is often those who are not academically motivated who benefit most from the writer's different approach.

We've also found that our approach to "redrafting" (the British word for "revision") is a great relief to students, who have been taught to concentrate too much on the product over the process. They think "redrafting" means that they have to "write it out all over again." And, within the frame of their usual lessons, it tends to be, by teachers' own admissions, perfunctory. So to discover redrafting as a genuinely creative process—even if you end up with "less product"—can be a revela-

tion. I heard a pupil, when questioned as to what he had liked best about working with a writer, answer: "Getting rid of all the rubbish."

The pupils are generally intrigued to meet a writer in person. They want to know what car you drive, where you bought your boots. And I think this is healthy. Beyond the immediate fun, it's good to plant this idea of writing as a possible career. It's not so much that we are encouraging students to become professional writers, more a matter of opening up their notion of what is possible, especially in those schools from which a majority of students drift into the main local industry. And for those that do show real aptitude and interest, we are keen to show them where else to go, and why. NAWE recently commissioned case studies from Creative Writing graduates. These studies demonstrate the extraordinary range of reasons why people choose to study writing, their expectations and achievements. Maggie Butt, lecturer at Middlesex University, writes:

> Our students are coming out of University with all the skills which constitute true "graduateness".... A small minority choose the writer's life, perhaps going on to post-graduate study, aiming to become recognized as playwrights, novelists, or poets, and usually supplementing their income with some other "day job." Some of our students have gone directly into work as professional writers, journalists, advertising copywriters, script-writers, dramatists. Others have chosen to use the insights and skills they've gained as teachers, PR people, art therapists, website designers, book editors, sub-editors, TV researchers, literary agents, librarians...parents.[3]

The justifications for creative writing in education are evident on almost any level of enquiry. We have the statistics that show how students' reading and writing improves. We have put aside our maverick inclinations long enough to tick the necessary boxes for those who have the real power, and now we find ourselves working with the guardians of the curriculum we once fought strongly against. And yet it still seems a struggle. In England, it goes without question that all pupils will benefit from geography field trips and other extra-mural activities. Why can't the writer's visit be considered such a regular entitlement? It has that same impact—of changing the space in which learning happens. Maybe, though, the writer's involvement in the classroom will always be extra-curricular. Maybe that's actually the best way to ensure that the art and craft of writing is not dogged by connotations of "requirements" and "attainment targets."

Recently, NAWE's work has become extra-mural in truly unexpected ways. We used new technology developed by the Digital World Centre in Salford to "teleport" a writer into the classroom.[4] The writer, based anywhere (given the necessary equipment), is projected as a full-size image into the classroom, with full eye-to-eye contact with the pupils. The potential is extraordinary: writers in New York working with schools in Yorkshire, and vice versa. The teleporting also helps overcome the worrying new level of legal and paperwork requirements to be met when taking pupils out of school. A poet in Manchester recently wanted to take pupils to work in the new Lowry Centre, but this meant going over a bridge and was therefore deemed too complicated! In such a bureaucratic climate, it's amazing that *anything* adventurous gets to happen at all.

But writers are a determined bunch, keen to stretch not only pupils' sense of what writing is all about but also their own workshop repertoire. So, yes, you will still find writers pushing the boundaries, like poet Katrina Porteous with pupils on a Durham beach, using words like a geologist's tools to discover how the coastline was once blackened with slag from the now-closed collieries.

In addition, NAWE's new partnership with the Literacy Strategy and the QCA (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority) has resulted in a long-term project called, appropriately, Writing Together. This is probably the first time so many mavericks have been working directly with "curriculum people." We have been running a series of sponsored residencies, each exploring a different structure and approach, with the aim of promoting them as models which schools throughout the country can adopt. We're particularly keen to encourage the longer-term residency and for writers to work right across the curriculum, not just within English. We are also highlighting the contribution which non-fiction writers can make. Creative non-fiction (or literary non-fiction, as we call it) is a relatively new phenomenon here, and it's a type of writing which fits with the curriculum particularly well. A series of conferences for teachers around the country will showcase all the residencies and offer hundreds of teachers the opportunity to work with writers and learn about the practicalities of setting up projects within their own schools. We have done this successfully at primary level (pupils aged five–eleven). This time the focus is on secondary level, specifically pupils in year Eight (age thirteen). Currently, we are finding it difficult to attract as many teachers as we would like. There is some irony in the fact that the QCA, having agreed with us about the benefit of engaging writers to enhance the creative aspects of the curriculum, is struggling to get that message across to schools who have become resigned to delivering a curriculum they basically dislike, an accountable schedule from which they dare not relent.

Running NAWE, I don't get as much time as I would like to write, let alone undertake residencies, but I feel it's important to keep close to the action. That way you really know the challenges, the pitfalls, and the marvels. You know first-hand why you're working so hard to fight for more funding or a shift in education policy. Recently, I went into a school in Dorset where they wanted me to work on poetry with a group ages seven to thirteen. Knowing that they wanted a final performance, I came up with the idea of The Poetry Channel.[5] Each group took responsibility for a particular programme for the final broadcast: the youngest worked on a versified weather report, others on news, sport, a clothes show, a holiday programme, etc. The different programmes and diverse topics immediately suggested different poetic forms and linguistic strategies. I felt that, in any one group, the attitude to what poetry could do was transformed. All together, it created a buzz throughout the school, not to do with the particular, little-known writer, but with taking on the world using words.

Ingenuity. Determination. Both are commendable, but it should not be the case that a balanced budget should rely so heavily on both. There have been some well-financed schemes, the longest running of which was the W. H. Smith Poets in Schools programme, which provided a sizeable fund for a large number of three-day placements. The Regional Arts Boards (now incorporated in a single Arts Council England) also ran their own regional support schemes, typically funding half the cost of a placement, with the school expected to find the rest from its own budget.

Recently, it's been more difficult, with funding very patchy. With so much research now available on the benefits of writers working in schools, it is surely time for a comprehensive scheme whereby all schools can benefit. We at NAWE are certainly up for the challenge: ready to put teachers and writers in touch; ready to refine writers' skills as necessary; ready to support the resulting partnerships and broadcast the successes.

Our very latest ventures seek to involve the wider community in significant numbers. As part of a major Culture Online initiative in Britain, NAWE is working with the Laurence Sterne Trust to develop resources that will engage both students and the general public in creative writing on the Internet. Shandy Hall (where Sterne wrote *Tristram Shandy*) is just down the road from NAWE's own base in North Yorkshire. With specially developed online tools, a writer-in-residence at Shandy Hall will be leading an experiment in non-linear narrative, using Sterne as a paradigm. (Sterne's extraordinary approach to narrative is being increasingly recognized as a major influence on the modern novel.) This project, while focusing on a specific literary collection and venue, is seen as a model which could be replicated in many other situations, bringing together literary heritage, live writing, education, and technology in an unprecedented manner. If that sounds a little esoteric, then the spin-offs are already shaping up as more populist. This summer, we are setting up an online writing project for the National Rail Museum. 2004 is the 200th anniversary of the very first rail journey and "Moving Stories" will be a website linked to the RailFest to which anyone (at home or abroad) can contribute stories about journeys of their own. I can see it being used as a way of initiating writing in the classroom. Enthusing about the project, poet Maura Dooley writes:

> The relevance to children's fiction is everywhere in it. There are loads of obvious books from *The Railway Children* and *Paddington Bear* to *Carrie's War, Mister Tom,* and all the evacuee stories. All that is still used hugely in schools. So both the oldster memories and the youngster learning opportunities will be plentiful.[6]

This is in no way curriculum-driven. But "Moving Stories" will (we believe) deliver educational benefits of which the education authorities could previously only dream. In 1999, the British government published a report titled *All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education*. The recommendations of this 200-page document were clear: We need an education system which caters for the new shape of society in which communication, innovation, and creativity are the skills in demand.[7] Four years on, and it looks as if the mavericks are still the most likely agents to bring this about.

1. *The Guardian* (July 10, 2003), reprinted in *Writing in Education*, No. 30 (NAWE, 2003).
2. *Writing in Education*, No. 22 (NAWE, 2001), iii.
3. *Writing in Education*, No. 24 (NAWE, 2001), 2.
4. *Writing in Education*, No. 22 (NAWE, 1999), 28.
5. *Writing in Education*, No. 16 (NAWE, 1998), 10.
6. Comments from an email (to Kit Monkman, forwarded to me), December 2003.
7. *All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education*, a Report by the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (1999).