

Supporting writing through modelling in a variety of subjects

Harminder Thandi

Barnwell School, Hertfordshire

Abstract

Harminder Thandi graduated from the Herts. MEd in Leading Teaching and Learning in 2006. In this article, she describes the development of the strategy of teachers' modelling of writing in front of their students as a way of supporting students' writing in different subjects.

When I began my writing project I had a specific responsibility to work with students with dyslexia. I provided one-to-one specialist tuition and in-class support for students and also offered advice and guidance to colleagues. This work meant that I was able to observe how students are taught to write in a range of different subjects.

It became clear to me that some students, while able to demonstrate a good level of understanding orally, were lacking the ability to represent their learning in a written form. These students were at a disadvantage because current assessment arrangements are so dependent on writing (Bearne, 2003). My colleagues were also concerned about this and comments such as: *I know they understand but they cannot reproduce it in their course work* were not uncommon. The issue of students' writing was also raised in an inspection report. Improving writing became a key concern at my school and was included in the school development plan 2005/6. We were awarded additional funding under the 'Literacy and Learning' initiative (DfES, 2004a) which enabled us to access materials, training and consultancy support.

I had been a science teacher for fifteen years and like many of my colleagues had felt driven to cover *content* in my subject. Literacy was often seen as an 'add on' and the job of the English department. Then I researched writing frames as a strategy to support students' writing and found that, although this helped them to structure their writing more effectively, it did not help them to extend it. Writing frames are often used as a 'quick fix' tool without encouraging

students towards independence. They can lead to writing that is formulaic.

The challenge of writing

Why do students find writing so challenging when they seem to find it relatively easy to express themselves orally? Mostly children speak in the context of conversations which tend to be spontaneous, informal and interactive. Talk is predominantly a social activity with prompts and responses to help it forward. Writing on the other hand is usually organised, planned and undertaken as an individual activity (Perera, 1984). It requires taking control of language and restructuring it, making it more detailed and elaborate and adhering to the conventions of grammar such as spelling and punctuation (Smith and Elley, 1998). In addition to this, each curriculum subject has its own specialist vocabulary that makes up part of the 'language of the subject'. In asking our students to compose writing, be it a conclusion for a science experiment or a persuasive essay in RE (Religious Education), we require them to think about many things simultaneously, without the prompting that usually happens during conversation. It is perhaps more difficult now than ever before for students to translate their thoughts into writing because they are exposed to multimodal texts e.g. sound and image (Bearne, 2003).

Writing is not simply a matter of representing your learning however. It involves quite sophisticated kinds of thinking. We could say that writing involves three processes: *planning*, *translating* and *reviewing* (Hayes and Flower, 1980). Planning can be described as generating and organising ideas. Translating is taking the ideas from the planning stage and turning them into sentences and paragraphs. Reviewing is the process of improving writing by editing. This has been referred to as the *cognitive engine of writing* (Sharples, 1999). For some of our students, poor writing ability may lead to low self-esteem and a loss of self-confidence (Galbraith and Alexander, 2005) preventing them from achieving their true potential.

The cognitive demands of writing are also dependent on the type of writing task. Some writing tasks are merely 'knowledge telling' activity, for example to fill in the answers in the box requires very little thinking. I was more interested in 'knowledge transforming' activity which involves the construction of meanings and the transformation of ideas (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987). This leads to deep learning. Knowledge transforming tasks require more time which is a challenge when colleagues are under pressure to cover the

content. The National Curriculum and the examination culture of today's education system must take some of the blame for this.

The idea of modelling

I felt that I had something to contribute to this development agenda – the problem of extended writing for deep learning across the curriculum. When I worked with students with dyslexia I had been able to help them extend their writing by modelling the writing process. This had been suggested in various national reports and guidance documents (DfEE, 2001; DfES, 2004b). In these documents the following 'sequence for teaching writing' is suggested as a way of modelling writing.

- Establish clear aims
- Provide examples
- Explore features of the text
- Define conventions
- Demonstrate how it is written
- Compose together
- Scaffold first attempts
- Independent writing
- Draw out key learning

Modelling involved showing them how I write myself, making my thinking explicit in the process. It was particularly important to model writing in our school because many of our students are unlikely to see adults engaged in writing other than informal writing such as shopping lists, telephone messages and absence notes. In Stevenage, the number of adults with higher education is below national levels and students enter the school with attainment that is below average (Ofsted, 2005). This makes it even more important that they are exposed to good writing and see adults engaged in writing at school. My proposal was that modelling writing in subject specific ways would significantly enhance students' learning.

Modelling writing is not simply writing on the board for students to copy into their books and in my experience students often protest if they are faced with this task. Modelling writing requires the teacher to make explicit the thought processes that are usually invisible (Wray and Lewis, 1997). According to David Perkins and his team at Harvard, making thinking visible is a powerful strategy for learning (Perkins, 2003). I wanted to ask my colleagues to write in front of their students and make their thinking visible by thinking

aloud – not just saying what they were writing, but providing a running commentary which makes explicit the cognitive process as it unfolds. This would include for example the choice of words and decisions concerning the structure and organisation of the writing. This has been referred to as ‘metacognitive modelling’ (Tonjes, 1988).

This was going to be challenging for colleagues who were unused to revealing the ‘cognitive engine of writing’ (Sharples, 1999). I had to address the issue of colleagues’ confidence with the conventions of a chosen text-type, for example active or passive voice, first, second or third person, connectives, sentence structure and so on, particularly in non-fiction subjects. Previous attempts to develop teachers’ understanding of such matters in our school had not proved very effective in transforming practice. In considering how best to help develop my colleagues’ knowledge, skills and confidence in using this approach I came to the conclusion that coaching would be the most suitable option. Evidence suggests that coaching is a more effective form of professional development than attending external courses (Cordingley, Bell, Evans and Frith, 2005; Angelides, 2002).

Learning about coaching

My first move was to seek support from one of the consultants funded under the National Strategy. Sheila Ball became my coach which enabled me to experience the range of different coaching styles I had read about in the literature. The point of coaching is to enable colleagues to engage in systematic reflection through awareness-raising and active listening and to support experimentation in the classroom. This demands a ‘safe-to-fail’ atmosphere in which there is a great deal of trust and collegiality. I think that the fact that I was not a head of department or a member of the senior leadership team was an advantage in this situation. Perhaps I was able to exercise leadership because there were no complications regarding power or position in the organisational structure of the school. I also benefitted from working in a school where senior leadership actively encourages teacher leadership as part of a long term capacity building strategy.

In taking on the role of coach I was guided by the principles set out by Roberts and Henderson (2005); in particular I would:

- avoid being critical or judgemental
- respect confidentiality

- remain positive and build on strengths
- challenge colleagues
- maintain the focus
- share responsibility in the initial planning stages
- encourage reflection.

I thought that a three part coaching cycle would be most suitable to achieve this.

The developmental process was initiated at an annual school residential conference in June 2005. The purpose of these conferences is to provide the opportunity for governors, teachers and other colleagues to focus on a priority identified in the school development plan and work collaboratively towards an agreed outcome. This then informs the collective response of the school community in taking forward new policies and procedures. The launch of the project was carefully planned in collaboration with the school's Literacy Coordinator (Pam), the Local Authority Consultant (Sheila) and the Deputy Headteacher (Paul). We wanted to create a dialogue about writing and persuade colleagues to adopt the modelling approach.

Seeking collaboration

I opened the conference with a presentation in which I explained the links between cognition and writing, drawing on the learning theory proposed by Vygotsky (2002). This was followed by a demonstration of how to 'model writing'. We then asked colleagues to work in groups on the same writing activity. We all had the opportunity to view each other's compositions during the evening relaxation period. We enjoyed these interactive activities, but the key challenge was to enable colleagues to apply what they had learnt to the very particular nature of their subjects. We asked colleagues to select a writing task they would use with their Year 7 students and describe the text type or types, its main features and conventions at text, sentence and word levels. This proved challenging for many colleagues. My email at the end of the first week asking about progress with modelling writing within the context of their subjects got very little response. I had to conclude that our grand launch had achieved little more than awareness raising.

The next step was to try collaborating with colleagues who were already confident. Marie, an Advanced Skills Teacher and head of the humanities department, was keen to try modelling writing with one of her classes. This provided me with the opportunity to pilot evaluation tools and rehearse the coaching cycle. I asked Marie to keep a writing log and allow me to use a student questionnaire and a group interview strategy to explore students' experience of the modelling writing activity. I learnt a great deal through this collaboration with Marie. It gave me the confidence to try working more closely with other colleagues.

We then convened a meeting of a small group of interested colleagues. I had made a video recording of my colleague Pam, the school's Literacy Coordinator, using the modelling approach. We looked at the video in the meeting and colleagues responded well. One colleague commented: *it's our students and not some model classroom in a fancy school somewhere*. Another commented *so it's not about teaching English but about teaching about how to write in your subject*; the penny had dropped. Even so, some colleagues felt that it involved too much writing and they found it difficult to see how this could possibly work in their subjects. I proposed that I would work with colleagues to see if we could develop these modelling strategies through coaching using video recordings. After due consideration, only one colleague, Iain, agreed to the arrangement. I needed at least one other colleague and so I approached Sophie, a science teacher. She was not a member of our literacy group and had missed the residential conference, but once I had explained my project to her she was keen to develop this approach to improve students' writing in science. I was very relieved to be able to move forward with two colleagues from contrasting curriculum areas, Science and RE, to the next stage of this process.

Using the three part coaching strategy

It was at this point that I was able to deploy the three part coaching cycle (Roberts and Henderson, 2005) which consists of a pre-observation meeting, observation and a post observation meeting. This type of coaching model is traditionally associated with developing a particular skill, craft or practice – in this case, the practice of modelling writing. However, for us coaching became a critical activity, a learning conversation through which we were able to come to a new understanding of the complexities and the

challenges of writing experienced by students. This understanding allowed for greater inclusion of all students in extended writing.

The pre-observation stage

In this stage I met with each colleague to explore the nature of writing in their subjects. We discussed key concerns about the state of students' writing and the improvements we hoped for by participating in this project. Iain and Sophie had similar concerns about students' writing even though their subjects, Science and RE require very different types of writing. In RE for example they are expected to put forward an argument or write a persuasive text; writing can be subjective, whereas in Science it tends to be objective and relatively brief. Despite these differences there were common concerns about the lack of detail and structure even in their best students' writing.

The writing tasks chosen were not specially created for the purposes of this project but were part of the current schemes of work, the only difference being that students were taught how to write in that text type by their teachers modelling the writing. We used annotated published examples to learn how to analyse text-type (Wray and Shilvock, 2003) – a part of the process that colleagues had previously expressed insecurity about. We agreed that both colleagues would practice modelling writing with a Year 9 high ability class even though the Deputy Headteacher had suggested that the focus should be on our middle band students because they had the least value added score. We agreed that raising achievement for our middle band group of students is very important, but both colleagues felt that with these high ability classes they would be able to focus on practicing this new approach in a situation in which students would be cooperative and there would be no behaviour issues to deal with. They needed to operate within their safety zone and I think this is important when trialling something new, but, as they both became more confident and came to realise the benefits for their students, they started to use the same approach with their other groups.

Observation stage

We used video recording as an aid to lesson observation and asked a number of other colleagues to help with the filming. This also had the advantage of widening participation in the process. We agreed that I would only view the recordings either in the presence of my colleagues or with their express permission.

Post-observation stage

We viewed the video recording of the lesson together, my role being to help my colleague to reflect critically on their lesson. This was more of a mutual exploration rather than a one way coaching process. I recorded the discussion so I could reflect on my own role and evaluate the strategy. It was clear that trying to write what we ask our students to write is not as easy as it might seem.

I wanted to write it myself. I needed to see what they go through and I felt that if I hadn't experienced writing it I could not talk them through it. It was harder than I thought and the last time I wrote like this was when I was at school. Yes it is difficult and requires a lot of thinking. I would never have realised this had I not written this example.

(Interview with Sophie)

At the end of the discussion, action points were discussed informally; I wanted to avoid the possibility that a formal procedure might interfere with the nature of this collaboration. An example of an action point for Sophie was to analyse the text for its textual features such as choice of connectives, sentence structure, voice and audience whilst reading it aloud.

To help Sophie with this we agreed that we would view the recording of Iain's lesson. He was particularly good at analysing the text using the language of literacy, for example, voice, audience, use of connectives and verbs and vocabulary. He also made reference to 'point, evidence and explain' with which our students are very familiar from their English lessons. He then engaged in some writing whilst thinking aloud although he hadn't yet been able to involve the students in this activity. That came later. Sophie really appreciated this rare opportunity to see a colleague teaching within a different subject. In the next cycle she appeared much more relaxed and confident. She used the language of literacy, for example purpose, audience, connectives, punctuation and point, evidence and explain. She also managed to engage in composing whilst thinking aloud in front of her students. Following this lesson, most students' writing was better structured and included appropriate scientific language and they appeared to be working more independently.

Including the students in the collaboration

As part of the evaluation of the modelling strategy I invited small groups of students to view the recordings with me and discuss their views on the way they were being taught how to write. The students

were very positive and the most interesting thing was that this approach enabled them to transfer learning from their English lessons. The following comment shows how my colleagues' focus on the use of connectives enabled students to transfer learning.

I know it seems funny but it doesn't seem right, you use them in English but you do different things in Science. Like in English you learn about language and in Science about experiments. You don't expect to go into a science lesson and think about writing using connectives and stuff like that but now we know that we can.

(Group interview with students)

Iain also learnt from Sophie. In her second lesson she involved the students in this process to a greater extent and was able to think aloud very well during the composition stage. After a short time both Sophie and Iain found that they could make their thinking visible to their students by thinking aloud in front of them. Even with the very small amount of writing done by their teachers, the students were able to see the workings of the 'cognitive engine of writing' (Sharples, 1999). This helped them to learn that writing requires thinking and editing and that it is an ongoing process as illustrated by this comment.

Before we didn't see her writing like this but now we can see that it's OK to go back and restructure the sentences and change stuff. Instead of thinking that once you've written it, it must stay like that because that's how it probably seems when she puts it up and says 'this is what I wrote before'. You don't know if she changed anything but now we see how she's thinking as she is writing.

(Group interview with students)

In the next cycle we decided to focus on editing and inviting the students to help with the composition. We decided then to extend this by asking students to work in pairs to compose a small section on mini white boards. During this stage students also engaged in thinking aloud. As my colleagues' confidence grew the modelling became more interactive with more time spent writing collaboratively. My interviews with students indicated that students preferred the more collaborative approach to writing when it is supported by the modelling approach.

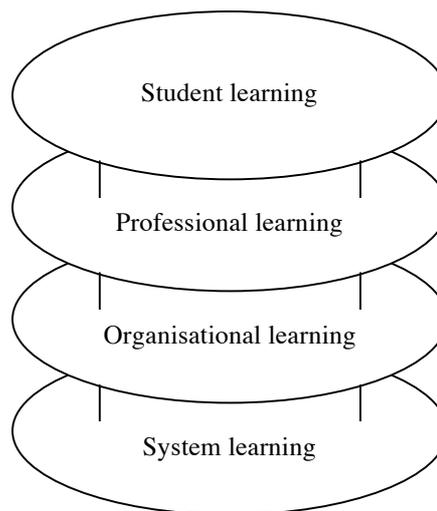
There was clear evidence from students and colleagues during interviews that writing was improving. I did not set out to measure this against National Curriculum levels. I was more interested in my

colleagues' professional opinions of their students' writing and in the opinion of students about their writing. The views expressed were more positive than those at the start of this collaboration. Iain felt that his students' writing was better structured and organised. It was also more detailed and they used 'point, evidence and explain' effectively. Students showed a much better disposition towards writing at home following the modelling sessions. Similarly Sophie reported an improvement in the conclusions students wrote. Their writing made reference to all the key findings and patterns in an investigation; it was no longer limited to the personal narrative but instead had become more factual and scientific.

Impact of the project

In evaluating this project I used the 'leadership for learning wedding cake' as a framework to analyse the multi-level learning that could be associated with the project. The wedding cake representation is helpful because not only does it highlight the way learning arises at different levels, it also draws attention to the vital links between these levels.

Figure 1: Multilevel learning



(Frost *et al.*, 2004:2)

Over a short time scale and with only two teachers it would not have been possible to draw any reliable conclusions about any increase in National Curriculum levels of attainment. I was more interested in

understanding the ways in which this practice supported student learning. Inviting groups of students to view video recordings of lessons provided an opportunity for them to reflect on how the practice affected their learning. I facilitated this by using prompts and probes in addition to open questions to explore their thinking. From the data collected during these sessions the following salient messages emerged:

1. Seeing the teacher's example of a piece of writing provided clarity about what the students should be aiming for.
2. The use of key literacy terms by teachers when they analysed the text triggered transfer of learning from their English lessons.
3. The students got a sense of how to structure and extend their writing, in the words of one student: *It shows me how it all fits together.*
4. The collaborative phase allowed students to tap into each other's thinking and learn from each other through dialogue.
5. Seeing their teachers think aloud and go through the cognitive struggle to select the correct vocabulary encouraged them to do the same.
6. The modelling approach helped students to understand that editing is a natural part of writing.
7. Engaging in dialogue about writing helped students to learn how to write a conclusion or a persuasive text in terms of voice, sentence structure, flow; and point, evidence and explain.

Most students said that they were aware of a great improvement in their writing.

These benefits arise when students are working as 'apprentices in learning' (Rogoff, 1990). This is not a matter of mimicking the teacher. As students went through a series of lessons where colleagues modelled writing, their confidence grew and they were even able to complete writing tasks at home to a good standard because they felt prepared. Even students who previously struggled with writing handed in a good piece of work with which my colleagues were very pleased. One student made this comment during a reflection session *it's the first assessment I have completed and handed in on time.* When I probed to find out why he replied: *I felt really prepared and confident that I could do it.*

The modelling writing project provided an opportunity for professional learning that went far beyond the technicalities of writing as described above. Both Iain and Sophie developed their

capacity for professional learning, for example by using video recording to evaluate other aspects of their practice. In this way I think that the project had contributed to capacity building which Gray *et al.* (1999) define as the development of a school's internal resources aimed at the improvement of student learning. It is not insignificant that both colleagues were subsequently appointed as Advanced Skills Teachers. In this role they have developed the use of coaching to support other colleagues' professional learning.

The regular presentations to colleagues, governors and the senior leadership team helped to influence colleagues and overcome resistance to the innovation. After the final presentation at our school's Teaching and Learning Forum, I showed video recordings of Sophie and Iain modelling writing. Following this, the Head of Mathematics approached me and said that she wanted to develop this approach in her department. She had already used writing frames which had been helpful but wanted to lift her students' writing above the formulaic. Other colleagues found the presentation revelatory, for example one said: *I usually try to correct my mistakes or sentences without the students knowing. Perhaps I should try this approach where I will be able to discuss these more openly with my students.*

Learning within the third layer of the wedding cake was evident although organisational learning cannot easily be attributed to any one development project. Nevertheless, I think it can be claimed that the project made a significant contribution to school development in that it raised awareness of the key role that writing plays in learning and established in the consciousness of the staff as a whole that this is something we can all work on in our subject teaching. It could also be said that collaboration between departments increased as a result of involvement in the project. It is also clear that the value of coaching as a professional learning strategy was promoted and has since been adopted and adapted for a range of purposes.

Beyond the school, presentations about the project have supported colleagues in other schools in taking up both the practice of modelling writing for students but also the practice of coaching for professional learning.

Engagement in this project has enabled me to grow and develop in different ways. I have become more confident in my ability to influence colleagues and lead change. I have presented my work on

a number of occasions to different audiences which has helped to refine my presentation skills and improve my confidence. I have learned a great deal about how to set up collaborative processes to influence change in classroom practice. I have improved my knowledge about the cognitive demands of writing and how a modelling approach can help to overcome these. I have developed my skills as a coach and learnt how to enable colleagues to reflect critically and improve their learning. I believe that I now have a higher profile in the school and have a significant role influencing and leading change.

References

- Angelides, P. (2002) A Collaborative Approach for Teachers In-service Training. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 28(1), 81-82.
- Bearne, E. (2003) *Rethinking Literacy: communication, representation and text*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Bereiter, C. & Scardamalia, M. (1987) *The Psychology of Written Composition*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Cordingley, P., Bell, M., Evans, D. & Frith, A. (2005) The impact of collaborative CPD on classroom teaching and learning. Review: What do teachers impact data tell us about collaborative CPD?, in *Research Evidence in Education Library*. London: EPPI Centre Social Science Research Unit Institute of Education, University of London.
- DfEE, (2001) *Literacy Across the Curriculum* (training folder). London: DfEE.
- DfES, (2004a) *Literacy and learning*. (Ref: DfES 0651-2004). London: DfES.
- DfES (2004b) *Strengthening teaching and learning through using different pedagogies Unit 4: using models and modelling techniques*. London: DfES.
- Frost, D. (2004) *Distributed Leadership or Leadership Density?* David Frost's Workshop at the Q5 Slotconferentie. December 2004. www.ISISq5.nl
- Galbraith, A. & Alexander, J. (2005) Literacy, self-esteem and Locus of control. *Support for Learning*, 20(1), 28-34.
- Gray, J., Hopkins, D., Reynolds, D., Wilcox, B., Farrell, S. & Jesson, D. (1999) *Improving Schools: Performance and potential*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

- Hayes, J. R. & Flower, L. S. (1980) Identifying the organization of writing processes, in L. W. Gregg and E. R. Steinberg (eds.) *Cognitive Processes in Writing*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Ofsted, (2005) *Barnwell School Inspection Report November*. London: Ofsted.
- Perera, K. (1984) *Children's Writing and Reading*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Perkins, D. (2003) *Making thinking visible*. www.newhorizons.org/strategies/thinking/perkinshtm
- Roberts, J. & Henderson, S. (2005) Coaching: Transforming the climate within schools and building capacity. Paper presented at the British Educational Research Annual Conference, University of Glamorgan, 14-17 September 2005. www.leeds.ac.uk/educodocuments/14380.htm
- Rogoff, B. (1990) *Apprenticeship in Thinking*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sharples, M. (1999) *Writing as a creative design*. London: Routledge.
- Smith, J. & Elley, W. (1998) *How children learn to write*. London: Paul Chapman.
- Tonjes, M. (1988) Metacognitive modelling and glossing, in C. Anderson (ed.) *Reading: The ABC and beyond*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Education.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (2002) *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Wray, D. & Lewis, M. (1997) *Extending Literacy*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Wray, D. & Shilcock, K. (2003) *Cross-Curricular Literacy 11-14*. London: Letts Educational.