

The untucked shirt **Anonymous English Teacher***

The teacher neglects to write the learning intention on the board. Instead, she shows an image on the screen and invites students to respond to the image. "Write about the ideas that come to you when you look at this image" she says. She has previously taught a few of these students and expects they will cope with such an open task.

* I am a secondary teacher who has been in this profession long enough to realise that the 'game is rigged'. The curriculum is incidental to the rich learning and creativity that occurs when minds and hearts are woken up to the possibility of constructing a more equitable and just society.

Seeing the blank and mortified expressions on some faces prompts her to provide a few more guidelines. "This is a creative exercise, so please don't just describe exactly what you see. Work at the level of ideas and emotions. What does this image make you think about? What does it make you feel? What ideas does it stimulate that link with 'Encountering Conflict'? Try not to state the obvious. And avoid cliché."

These are high performing and aspirational VCE students, so they understand the task. They understand the requirements of this area of study-'Writing in Context'. In previous years, together with her colleagues, she has emphasised to these students the importance of expressing original and interesting ideas, writing to engage readers, 'showing and not telling'. These students should be able to recognise 'good writing' when they see it. And yet, recognising 'good writing' and being 'creative' are quite distinct capabilities. Right?

She walks around the room, hovering, as all good English teachers do, behind individual students as they put pen to paper. Some are enthusiastic. Most are tentative. She knows not to hover too long behind the boy who has only written one sentence in the past five minutes. Instead, she notices an interesting word on his page and prompts him to write about that.

Almost unconsciously, she is already forming assumptions about that boy. His shirt is untucked. He would prefer to be doing Maths right now. He doesn't like reading. He is a reluctant writer. He is terrified about the marks he will receive in the Year 12 English exam at the end of the year. After this lesson, he will most likely ask his parents to find him a tutor, to write his essays for him, to help him become more creative, more expressive; to help him write the perfect piece of writing, to gain a perfect score. And if that fails...if perfection escapes him...he will purchase the best Context pieces from previous high achieving students and simply emulate their writing style.

She checks her assumptions. And allows him to dwell in the struggle space.

As she wanders around the room, the teacher wonders about the creative process. How difficult it is to be told to create a piece of writing. Surely the act of telling, in itself, is somewhat of an imposition. The creative impulse requires stimulus. And some stimuli simply do not spark creativity in some students. Creativity is such an individual creature. It cannot be imposed or contained. It cannot be determined or measured.

Her hovering reveals problems. Problems that she didn't expect to encounter at a school like this. Too many students are writing definitional statements, factual statements, uninteresting descriptions and glib, tired reflections on an image she had considered to be evocative. Too many students are writing sentences that are derivative and convoluted. She is aware that she must help her students to unlock those creative impulses, to find their own voice. She wants that boy to feel less of the burden of the omnipresent ATAR and more of the liberation that comes from writing about ideas, experiences and emotions.

The tsunami of performing to standards will engulf them all if she doesn't do something. She must do something.

After 15 minutes of writing time, she stops the class and throws them a couple of life jackets. She writes a list of words on the board and issues a new instruction. “Now respond to the same image by writing a sentence of 8 words or less. Include one or more of these words in your sentence.” She invites some students to share what they have written. The unexpected happens.

The boy with the untucked shirt offers to share his 8-word sentence with the class. The class erupts in spontaneous applause.

About this piece

This piece was originally written as part of *stella 2.0*, a program run by the Victorian Association of Teachers of English (VATE) to investigate the influence of standards-based reforms on the work of English teachers and English teacher educators in Australia.

stella 2.0 draws inspiration from the internationally esteemed *STELLA project* (Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia). In 1999 *STELLA* brought together English teachers and teacher educators from across Australia to talk and write about their work as teachers, and to develop the first set of discipline-based professional standards in the country.

stella 2.0 brings English teachers and teacher educators together in writing workshops and in an interactive online space to talk and write about their work and how professional and academic environments have changed for English teachers and English teacher educators in the last 10 years or so. The project will also enable English teachers and teacher educators to negotiate difficult policy and professional environments, and productively ‘speak back’ to standards-based reforms.

The author writes:

Over the past 25 years of my career as an English educator, I have attended many conferences, forums and workshops, run by VATE and other organisations and individuals. I can honestly say that the most value I have ever gained from all of my professional learning experiences has come from opportunities to interact with my colleagues, under the guidance of an ‘expert’ of some sort. The sharing of experiences, challenges and successes; the exchange of strategies and innovative ideas; the exploration and analysis...those have been the richest learning experiences. So when I heard about *stella2.0*, imagine my enthusiasm.

I attended three sessions in which the presenters would first facilitate a discussion based on set readings. Then we would all spend some time writing. How indulgent, to take 45mins to just write, in any style or form, in the company of other English educators. The subject matter was sometimes based on the set readings or guiding questions posed by the facilitators, such as:

1. What writing do you do in your everyday professional life? How do you (or others) use that writing?
2. Do you write for, or with, your students or colleagues?
3. What possibilities are there for this writing and what constraints?
4. How do you see writing in relation to your sense of yourself as an English educator? How have you used writing for your professional growth and/or learning?

We would share our pieces with others in our table groups, and many of us would later upload these pieces to an online forum. The opportunity to create, to write, read and respond to the creative output of colleagues was a treat. Just as belonging to a community has countless benefits, such as building your wellbeing and resilience while helping to shape your sense of self, there are numerous benefits to participating in a community of teachers as writers. I urge all English teachers out there to engage in reflective practice that involves putting pen to paper, or tapping away at your keyboard. If not for you, then do it for them - for those reluctant writers in your classrooms.