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Adrian Copping

UKLA National Conference 10-3-18

Enriching the English curriculum through creativity

“Yes we can!” *embedding creative approaches into non-fiction teaching,*

## **Abstract**

Do creative approaches only apply to fiction? How creative is your teaching of non-fiction? Developing ideas from his book ‘Being Creative in Primary English’ and his current PhD work on how creative thinking impacts on children’s writing, Adrian uncovers some of the areas of English that suffer from creative neglect. He will explore some useful strategies for restoring creativity with a focus on non-fiction.

## Introduction

I thought I had better put my job title up there so you can get a sense of where I am coming from – I like to keep it quite small print, as when people know what I do they check my powerpoint slides for spelling and grammatical errors, so that is just a secret between us.

My background is as a primary teacher – starting here **click** – small school in west Lancashire – not quite as long ago as when the picture was taken, 75 children – mixed y4/5/6 class. -

2 years later I was here **click** – large inner city 420 children, yr 4,5,6 classes for the next 5 years

Now I am at UoC, where I have been for 14 years- with many roles but now leading the primary PgCE programme across our three main campuses **click** for map, 3 **clicks** for location dots, **click** Lancaster, **click** Carlisle, **click** London

So, I have titled this talk ‘Yes we can’. There are many great people, world leaders **(click)**, educational commentators **(click)** who have coined this phrase as a statement of intent. My reason for using it is because I have worked with a great many

student teachers who when faced with planning a non-fiction unit of work usually say **click** ‘No we can’t’. “How do I teach instructions for a week?” “What on earth is a non-chronological report?” or “My school uses a scheme for non-fiction so that’s ok isn’t it?”

So, my hope for this afternoon is that you will go away feeling inspired about the creative opportunities available within non-fiction and my direction of travel in order to get there is **click**

1. where I am coming from **click**
2. impact of the current climate **click**
3. Putting on the waterproofs

It has been said there is no such thing as inappropriate weather, just inappropriate clothing. Whatever we think about the current performativity climate it is what we have and we can either go out in it without a coat or put on the goretex jacket and trousers and go out and enjoy it. So my hope today is to improve your wet weather gear.

### Where I am coming from

Back in 2015, I was **click** writing a book called ‘Being creative in primary English’. A former student of mine contacted me as she had inherited a ‘boy heavy’ year 5 class in quite a challenging school and was struggling to engage them with writing, she asked if I could help. So I went to meet them and the result was a two day Victorian mystery writing workshop, **click** where the Prime Minister of England was found dead in a fictional stately home’s upstairs toilet. I led, in role as the butler **click** (apologies for the ‘Govesque’ photo). The children wrote a range of material supporting their hypotheses to create a case file which they presented to the ‘judge’ **click** at the end of

the workshop. If you want to read more about that it is published in two places, In Education 3-13 [click](#) and then [click](#) Beyond Early Writing. Four key findings came out of that;

- An environment for thinking needs to be created and maintained,
- the process of thinking and getting to the product must have value,
- a tangible purpose leads to increased motivation and higher attainment
- high expectations lead to higher attainment

These findings along with a lot of further reading led to the creation of a 'think for writing' planning framework [click](#) which is now being evaluated and developed as part of my PhD, which looks at the impact of creative thinking on children's writing. Maybe 'Think for writing' will become the new 'talk for writing' and I will become as much in demand as Pie Corbett???

Very early data analysis is showing that where learning really takes place is not in the blocks but in the gaps [click](#) – so how do we help children work effectively in the gaps to make connections between the blocks and I would argue we need to do this through facilitating their creative thinking. By that I mean looking at and solving problems from a different perspective, avoiding orthodox solutions and **thinking** outside the box. This **creative** process allows you to explore connections, meet new challenges and seek solutions that are unusual, original and fresh.

Is this possible?

### Impact of the current climate

We have to be clear that our current system is more to do with politics [click](#) than it is with education. Marshall (2017) -

references at the end of slides, suggests that standards-based tests best fits an economists need for a simple indicator of whether public funding has paid off, evidence of learning is much messier, more complex and more wide-ranging than a number in a box.

And so I have seen the teaching of writing become much narrower, where every class I go into teaches children what a fronted adverbial is regardless of year group but very rarely what it is for or why a writer may choose to use one.

A friend of mine was showing me a paragraph of her daughter's writing which didn't make sense, had no flair but had ticks all over it – upon further inspection these were sentences which contained correct elements from the learning objective. My friend was incredibly confused.

And as I work in more and more schools, supporting development of English – I see evidence of whole school planning where pressured English leaders have felt compelled to respond to every government dictat, add-ons everywhere to a point where it is impossible to see the wood for the trees

**click**

Where expensive published planning is seen as the answer to the problems but in reality it causes a whole lot more – as I tell my students 'XXX scheme is not designed with your class in mind' – I work with teachers who feel like they have to deliver a scheme not teach their children, who feel like they have to deliver decontextualized grammar terminology not help their children become great writers and who are scared to do something interesting and engaging in case it isn't 'right'.

Why a focus on non-fiction?

Discuss with a partner – teachers, ex teachers – do you feel dread or joy when you have to plan a unit of NF? – reasons

In my experience and I apologise for a yardbrush size sweeping statement here – many teachers I meet and work with get excited about fiction and they want to add drama to it, play with language, working wall, exciting texts, use of film, connect in to a topic, sense of story, props, maybe even some simulation, for example, let's take an example of traditional tales – we can do some mantle of the expert being trainee vets dealing with a wolf with lots of bruising and a deep cut to his belly, we can do some role-play, freeze frame some scenes

But non-fiction – well, we'll just follow the plan, erm, not sure what to do here – I have seen it suffer from creative neglect.

So, it's time to **click** Put on the waterproofs so that we can be **click** singing in the rain

*By that I looking at Creative Opportunities within non-fiction that can help us enjoy what we are doing within the current climate and hopefully, have impact on learning. Most of these will not be new to you I would guess*

Purpose/audience/authorial intent

Why do you write? Discuss.

Shopping list, to do list, policy document for Head, Governors, Ofsted, for publication, notes for a lecture, planning, enjoyment – most of which is done electronically.

In school, writing often becomes a means to demonstrate learning and understanding – can you see the disconnect here - the purpose and audience is a teacher, and the purpose is to demonstrate certain criteria.

I am not sure I would be motivated or engaged by this and so the same target that has been on school development plans for

as long as I have been teaching, remains there ‘develop boys attainment and achievement in writing’. I don’t know about your experience, but I have found when you motivate children to write with a meaningful purpose beyond the teacher’s marking pile, the quality and engagement goes up.

Some recent PhD work I did in school was writing some raps with Year 4. I set up the simulation that some well-known children’s texts **click** were being turned into stage musicals and our task was writing an entrance rap for the lead characters. I said I would send them to the authors or publishers. We used Horrible Histories Charles II rap as a model. There was great engagement in the process of creating and writing, editing – as one child said to another ‘*He can’t send it if it’s not spelled right can he?*’ One of the publishers wrote back, loving the idea and the raps and said he would pass the work on to the author. Wow, talk about motivation.

I try and model this with my students- we did a session exploring the writing process, with a focus on discussion texts. I set up a simulation – writing a text in response to a website invitation, of relevance to them **click**. I created some stakeholder roles for them and in groups they developed some arguments and held the debate. **click**. Had the debate been real we would have sent the writing off as they did get into it and created some really good text – in fact they didn’t want to move on to the next part of the session.

This may seem like an obvious thing to say, but non-fiction is real – it is every day, part of real life experience – and it provides an opportunity to blur the lines between school and outside learning and writing and help children make connections between them. But we do have to make those

connections explicit between the different aspects of the work we are doing – if the children don't see the connections between purpose, audience, drafting, editing and any oral work or role play you do – that the purpose, for example, of holding the debate is to provide content, language and phrases for the written piece, then there is little point in doing them, they become a series of unrelated activities. The children have not had the benefit of being inside your head when you are putting the plan together –

But maybe they could help with the planning? That was a feature of the work I have been doing in school for my PhD **click**, the classes helping to plan the units of work, you can see connections, through arrows between raps, horrible histories and historical figures, but watch this space for data on the impact of that.

A feature of these examples is that each had an engaging stimulus, a hook to draw the children in. Often there is such a pressure to display and articulate learning objectives, deliver such high level subject knowledge that drawing the children in to be curious, engaged and inspired gets squeezed out. It could just be a question, a prop, something to be curious about and prompt questions, a different room layout, lighting, a photo, a trip, a film.

Supporting children to make connections between different elements of their learning helps provide a more holistic view of learning and a foundation for creative thinking. I don't know about you but I notice how many children have correct spellings in a test but get them wrong when they are engaging in writing, they can use a wonderful range of sentence structures for effect in an English lesson on story writing but then when writing in History their work is bland and they don't seem to be



able to see that writing is writing regardless of subject boundary.

I had the privilege of supporting some students in a wonderful afternoon of cross-curricular work where the question was simply **click** ‘Was King Henry VIII a good king?’ The y5 class were examining a range of source material from a range of perspectives: **click** Art, **click** poetry, letters, **click** speeches, they worked in pairs and their task was two-fold – responding to the question and evaluating the evidence as effective source material – high expectations!! My daughter is studying history at university and has had to write an assignment with a not dissimilar remit.

Here the teacher demanded critical thinking and creative thinking working together – writing for a new purpose – an evaluation report and a range of possibilities were available, looking for more unorthodox answers. In fact one of the children told the class teacher that the way the lesson was set up was biased because the teacher had chosen the source material.

If we respond to that through the findings of the Victorian mystery study I shared at the start – higher expectations lead to higher attainment, the process of learning has value, an environment for thinking – through lesson design, resources and open-ended approach and a tangible purpose which led to the children being highly motivated.

The above experience also shows how working with non-fiction provides an opportunity to play with information, mix it up, reformulate it, manipulate language for a purpose – in so doing teachers can assess understanding, rather than more formulaic information retrieval activities. McWilliam 2008 calls this

‘meddling in the middle’. Getting stuck in and intervening in the **click** process of learning and the process of writing. It seems to me to be much more helpful for a child’s learning to have misconceptions addressed in the process, sentence structure and form shaped during the process, language use and punctuation developed during the process rather than after the event when marking the work, because at that point you can’t do anything about it and the next day the children will have forgotten. Just like any of my students telling me **after** their school placement they had struggled and there had been issues, I can’t do anything about it, so let’s address it during the process.

Let’s consider the ‘meddling in the middle’ opportunities available during the aforementioned ‘Henry VIII’ afternoon: As children are moving around the classroom investigating the sources and discussing their merits in pairs, what better way for the teacher to address misconceptions, assess understanding and develop critical and creative thinking than get stuck in, in the middle with the children, questioning, discussing, challenging. Whilst the written piece is important, what rich opportunities would have been missed if that is all the teacher relied upon.

Non-fiction text types can also provide plenty of opportunity for getting your learners to think a bit more creatively.

Why not bring the worlds of fiction and non-fiction together, perhaps consider how the three bears can protect their home from notorious housebreaker **click** Goldilocks. Could learners develop a sophisticated burglar alarm system, with long distance warning for protection during those pre-breakfast woodland strolls and develop a set of installation instructions?

Could children, writing in role for the **click** WRA (Wolf Recognition Alliance) seek to redress the complete bias against this much maligned animal in traditional stories, by writing a persuasive piece calling for this anti-wolf prejudice in traditional stories to stop?

Perhaps the children could engage in some reversal thinking – through exploring the reverse, however seemingly ridiculous, the theory goes, children are able to understand and communicate the concept. For example, using one of my favourite texts, **click** quite old now, but great, *The Bully* by Jan Needle, perhaps a ‘Ten top tips for how to bully younger children more effectively’ guide for the lead character in the story could be interesting,

Maybe a **click** *Grand Designs* or a **click** George Clark’s amazing spaces documentary and interview showcasing the creative and innovative design skills of the wolves from another of my favourites **click** ‘The three little wolves and the big bad pig’, which I am sure the Wolf Recognition Alliance would approve of!!

The possibilities and learning opportunities are vast and varied.

But what about the elephant in the room. **Click**

A quick word on SPAG or GPS or whatever other arrangement of these letters it is currently;

So I have created my own acronym for how I think these key elements of the writing process should be taught, so I am making a CASE, **click** C, A, S, E for grammar, punctuation and spelling.

## Contextual,

It has to be taught in context so it makes sense and children can connect it to the writing process, in the context of the text type, purpose and audience. Remember from earlier '*You can't send it off if it's not spelled right*'. And one of my favourites from one of the Year 6 children as part of my PhD data so far - '*It's got to have right grammar for the governors don't it?*'

## Authors intent

A lot of the grammar teaching I see is unfortunately quite mechanistic and goes as far as teaching the concept for example, the crowd favourite 'fronted adverbial'. Children now know it exists, know what one looks like and where it goes, but do they know why an author would choose to use one and how often and what it's purpose is in a text. I always know when adjectives and figurative language have been taught as I see stories that start '*One fine, sunny, hot, cloudless day, the sun shone magnificently like a giant yellow beachball in the empty, blue, clear, expansive sky.*' It just doesn't work.

## Sentence combining

Wyse and Torgerson 2017 in a recent issue of British Education Research Journal include this extract from a 2017 House of Commons select Committee report on Primary assessment. It says that '*One issue with the writing assessment is the focus on technical aspects, like grammar and spelling, over creativity and composition. We are not convinced that this leads directly to improved writing and urge the Government to reconsider this balance and make spelling, punctuation and grammar tests non-statutory at Key Stage 2 .*

Wyse and Torgerson 2017 discuss their own findings and the results of a Debra Myhill 2011 intervention which suggests that

sentence combining is a powerful tool for teaching grammar to improve writing. **Sentence combining** is the process of joining two or more short, simple **sentences** to make one longer **sentence**. The purpose behind it is helping children develop the ability to use sentence structure to enhance meaning – links back to the ‘a’ authorial intent.

Myhill’s intervention exemplifies this;

It comprised detailed teaching schemes of work in which grammar was embedded and where a meaningful connection could be made between the grammar point and writing. And four key features;

- The inclusion of activities which encourage talking about language and effect;
- The use of authentic examples from authentic texts.
- The use of activities which support students in making choices and being designers of writing.
- The encouragement of language play, experimentation and games.

And that leads perfectly onto my ‘e’ which could be ‘embedded’, ‘experimentation’ but is..

### Exploration,

Investigation, being playful – collect errors. A lot of the children I meet are more engaged and learn more effectively if they are exploring and investigating spelling conventions, grammatical conventions, testing them out and playing with them. Could you have an ‘errors’ wall in your classroom – examples from real life that children have noticed and collected. Play around with turning an informal text message into a letter to the Head Teacher – what changes would you make?

## Why is this important? In summary

- These approaches are usually more enjoyable for teachers to teach and learners to learn from
- These kind of approaches tend to facilitate greater understanding that go beyond a test, build a greater desire to learn and question and be more curious
- Non-fiction presents an opportunity for making a difference — for children to have a voice on real issues – a year 5 class of mine gave their perspectives on a proposed new bypass for their town and I sent 32 letters off to the local paper, which they said they couldn't print **click for feature** but they did a feature with extracts
- For children to explore texts themselves and investigate features in a text and is more motivating and helps with connection making
- These approaches can help make connections and maximise real world learning, they add some real life context, provide opportunity to write for a real purpose (as my earlier example of the bypass shows) and blurs the boundaries between the real world and school.

**Click** – references

**Click** image credits

And finally **click**