Contextualising the Teaching of Writing

In this paper, presented at the AATE-ALEA National Conference in Canberra, Australia in July 2007, Rodney Martin demonstrates that it is not only possible, but also practical to contextualise the teaching of writing and its associated skills in a functional manner that truly reflects the writing process. After 14 years as a primary teacher and curriculum developer, Rodney became a writer and editor of children’s literature, educational and reference works now published in 18 languages other than English. His international experience as a teacher, curriculum writer, author, editor and professional speaker brings informed insights to the teaching of writing.

Learning to write
A small minority of people have a natural ear for language and talent for expressing themselves in writing. The rest of us have to work at it. Learning to write is a lifetime journey if we aspire to excellence. Some notable writers bear witness to this.

The greatest part of a writer’s time is spent in reading, in order to write; a man will turn over half a library to make one book. (Samuel Johnson)

A writer is somebody for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people. (Thomas Mann)

I met, not long ago, a young man who aspired to become a novelist. Knowing that I was in the profession, he asked me to tell him how he should set to work to realize his ambition. I did my best to explain. ‘The first thing,’ I said, ‘is to buy quite a lot of paper, a bottle of ink, and a pen. After that you merely have to write.’ (Aldous Huxley)

My personal experience as an author is that apart from early formal instruction and reading, in the end my ability to write increased in proportion to the amount of formal writing I undertook. It also improved as a result of experience as an editor – it is easier to find flaws in the writing of others and to practise the consideration of remedies. The time I took to develop any skill in writing might have decreased, I believe, had my formal instruction been of a different nature. It failed to give me the trade secrets I learned later.

The grammar textbook
The English grammar textbook has a dubious history. From the earliest books on the topic by Ben Jonson (inventor of the apostrophe of possession in 1692), Bishop Robert Lowth, UK (1762), A Short introduction to English Grammar and Lindley Murray (an American lawyer in 1794), we have inherited a corpus of rules that are quoted even today.

Student perception through the ages, judging by the humorous anonymous verse on the subject, was invariably more accurate than the authors’ regarding the usefulness of the content and teaching from such books. Student views often subverted teachers’ faith in these prolific works. In the 1950s in South Australia the standard primary textbook was Active English. Students called it IN-Active English. In the 1960 and 70s, as a classroom teacher, I used a textbook titled Let’s make English Live. My students referred to it as Let’s make English DIE.

It seems that historically, children were more perceptive (or brutally honest) about the efficacy of the pedagogy than we educators.
“Why do we have to learn this stuff? We never use it!”
The pedagogy failed to give the content relevance to the reality of writing. In fact the
textbooks did not even lead to writing outcomes. Students did not see the point. However, some lessons stuck for life – “Thou shalt not split an infinitive, nor end a sentence with a preposition!” These maxims survive without today’s user necessarily knowing what an infinitive or a preposition is.

The evolving pedagogy

Some of the major influences over recent decades on evolution in pedagogy where language knowledge and writing are concerned were:

1970s: Holdaway¹ who introduced the methodology of shared reading for interacting with texts. This grew through later classroom development to embrace the use of texts as models for demonstrating writing (Martin²).

1980s: Graves³ who promoted the concept of process writing. The idea of relevance was creeping into the instructional environment.

1980s: Derewianka⁴ and other genrists who linked an understanding of the nature of texts to their social purpose and functions. The practical face of grammar, structure and style was revealed.

1990s: Luke and Freebody⁵ who introduced us to the four roles of the literacy learner and we saw in detail the active rather than passive learner.

Coupled with these complex concepts, however, teachers generally feel less confident in their specific knowledge of the language, and writing in particular, than they do with the teaching of reading. Translation of the educational principles into the instructional environment en masse has been problematic for writing. For example, in the UK National Literacy Strategy, improvement in reading was more easily achieved than in writing. These gains resulted from considerable effort by the government in professional development of teachers and provision of resources. It is rare for governments to commit to such an extent in funding the professional development of teachers and access to resources. Efforts too often end at a list of outcomes or standards or a framework, which fail to arm teachers for a more informed approach to the teaching of writing.

Can the simple medium of a textbook meet the needs of teachers en masse and at the same time deliver the complexity of the pedagogy? Can the macro picture of the writing and editing processes be delivered without being drowned by the focus on instruction in micro skills and rules?

Let’s consider a project-based approach with the use of a text model as a context for demonstrating and examining writing style and technique, and a writing project as a medium for unpacking skills, process and technique in reading, writing and speaking. The project will incorporate the pedagogical history provided by academics such as Holdaway, Graves, Derewianka, Luke and Freebody together with some parallels to the commercial writing environment. The methodology involves a layered approach to language knowledge – each layer reinforcing the others so understanding evolves.
The text model
The following extracts might be used at the upper primary school level as a set of examples of journalistic reporting and associated arguments in the form of ‘letters to the editor’.

The text model might be shared with a group by projecting it onto a screen, or in printed format in a textbook. Alternatively, students might read the text in small groups. The main point here is that it provides students with content that is within their likely experience through news media. It offers a journalistic recount accompanied by a variety of points of view on the topic. Meta-tags identify particular aspects of the text and its structure.

From this text model, we promote students’ understanding of the text at various levels, to divulge some trade secrets of the writer’s craft and develop their confidence towards exploring such a text as a writing project. During the subsequent process, we introduce them to various aspects of writing (idea generation, planning, research, editing, grammar, vocabulary development and style) and finally use their project as a basis of publication involving their speaking formally to an audience.

Throughout this process, note the ways in which any particular aspect of writing can be revisited – a layered approach in which students have more than one opportunity and vantage point from which to see the relevance of the specific knowledge being presented or experienced.

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WORLD NEWS
Friend Reports Basketball Drug Cheat

Marina Hendriksen, the captain of the Lightning basketball team was tested positive for a banned medication after winning an international semi-finals game in Europe last night.

The sporting authority was alerted by Jessica Fremmer, a close friend of the basketball star, and the test finding resulted in the Lightning losing the game and being eliminated from the competition.

Hendriksen declared, “I am absolutely innocent. I have never taken anything that will give me an unfair advantage in sport, but I do suffer from a rare illness that needs special medication.”

Fremmer reported that she was worried about her friend and needed to take some form of action that would get her friend to stop taking the banned substance because it would affect her health.

A medical expert advised that while the medication Hendriksen is accused of taking does cure the illness she claims to have, it can also help athletes by increasing their muscle mass but harms the heart long term.

The former friends are reported to be not on speaking terms and Fremmer is obviously upset by the outcome – as are the other members of the basketball team.

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Headline announces the topic.

Lead sentence tells when, where, who and what.

Paragraphs present details.
Comprehension
Modern approaches to comprehension give us the means to become code breakers and gain knowledge of the content, structure and purpose of texts. The following four sample questions allow different forms of examination of the text. Of course, such questions can be asked only if the text is substantial enough in its content and complexity to warrant different kinds of thinking and reflection.

Literal
Which writer thinks that Jessica Fremmer was unfaithful to Marina Hendrikson?

Students will find the answer to this question (Bob S. Ledder) within one line in the text. The answer given will be clearly correct or incorrect. It is the retrieval of information presented literally in the text.

Inferential
According to the letters to the editor, what is the most popular public opinion about Jessica Fremmer’s action?

This question involves the gathering of multiple pieces of information and then summarising and interpreting the details into a single view. A student’s answer will be able to be judged as accurate or inaccurate.
The above questions might be answered by students individually. The next two questions suggest discussion in small groups as they invite opinion and observation and might be explored in greater depth if students meet a variety of responses.

**Creative/Personaly reflective**
Which view on the topic do you agree with? Why?

Within a group, students not only offer a personal opinion, but might need to support or defend that opinion more than once. Such questions allow them to call upon their personal prior experiences.

**Critical**
What is the difference between the World News article and the letters to the editor in the way they speak to the reader?

This question is directed at students’ understanding of the audience and purpose of the various elements of the text model and how this affects the style of the writing. It involves a comparative study of the text elements and a summary of the language used by the writers. This is not a simple task and requires considerable practice.

In discussing the last two questions, students may alter their original viewpoint as they gain better insight through the opinions and observations of other students and commentary or questioning by the teacher.

**Discourse on the text (technique and style)**
The traditional English textbook failed to draw a link between writing and instruction in language knowledge. It failed to provide a context. This link might come from linguists, but their tendency is to describe how language works rather than exploit it as a tool and innovate on its use.

A more utilitarian sense of the language is found in the experience and practice of writers and editors, who are aware of their available choices in technique and style. Writers and editors use their language knowledge to have a desired effect on their audience. Discourse allows us to unpack this thinking through the devices, technique, style and structures used by the writer(s) of any text. These are the trade secrets.

In the classroom it would be overkill to try and cover every element of technique and style in a single example. Individual text models offer particular opportunities. It would be more appropriate to select a shortlist of elements that present opportunities for instruction in the context of some writing project the students will undertake. The teacher can then discuss or explain these elements within the context of that text model.

Here are some insights from the ‘WORLD NEWS’ texts provided earlier:
A discussion happens when more than one opinion is offered on a topic. You often find this in the Letters to the Editor section of newspapers when several people write their views on a topic that has been in the news.

**Arguments**

There are two main parts to an argument. The writer gives:

- An **opinion** on a topic
- **Ideas, reasons** or **evidence** to support the opinion

**Correspondence**

Letters to the editor of a newspaper are usually brief. A **heading** tells the reader the topic. The first sentence or paragraph is usually the writer’s **opinion** on the topic. The next sentence or paragraph explains the writer’s **reasons** or **evidence** to support the opinion and the letter often ends with a sentence that **summarises** the writer’s thoughts and reminds the reader of the argument or opinion.

**Should**

The word **should** is often used when a writer, expresses an opinion about what ought to be.

*Friends should stick together.*

*...she should have spoken directly to her friend.*

**Connectives**

Connectives help you to link arguments with reasons or evidence to support them.

*If Hendriksen was flouting the rules, then she would have been discovered…*

These points might be introduced by the teacher, but students can then engage with these elements in a practical sense while working on a writing project.

**Writing project**

The expression of opinions about the text in the comprehension activity and the insights in the discourse on the text can be further pursued in a writing project, embracing all the elements of the writing process.

**Idea generation**

What is your opinion about the World News article *Friend Reports Basketball Cheat*?

Write your own letter to the editor and join the discussion.

- Is Marina Hendriksen guilty?
- Is Jessica Fremmer a good friend?

While prompts can provide a specific topic for writing for some, many students may have other views they pursued in group discussion and may want to continue with those views in writing. The objective is to have children adopt a writing project in which they can employ insights they have gained and views they have formed through discussion in reading, comprehension and text discourse.
**Planning**

Ideas need to be explored as a plan for writing. This is a form of mapping how ideas might translate into a cohesive piece of writing – a type of storyboarding. It helps a writer to enter the drafting of a text with greater confidence and sense of direction. A typical planning session might involve the following activities:

- In a small group, discuss your views on the newspaper article.
- Study the news article for evidence to support your opinions.
- Test your opinions and your reasons in group discussion.
- Make notes about the main points you will make in your letter. Here is a plan you could use.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is your opinion on the topic?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Argument</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What reasons do you have to support your opinion?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Remind the reader of your opinion and briefly say why you believe this.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Drafting**

With adequate discussion and exploration of ideas and planning, the task of creating a first draft becomes less daunting for the writer. There can be a perceived direction or pathway for the writing to follow. The objective at this stage is to get thoughts down on paper (or on screen). Prompting by a textbook or the teacher can be brief at this stage in the process.

- Write your letter to the editor using your notes to remind you of the main points in your argument.
- If you have more than one reason for your opinion, begin a new paragraph for each reason.
- Keep your letter short.

**Editorial input**

One of the hidden mysteries of writing in the minds of many is the editorial function. This is a topic on its own but for the sake of brevity in this instance, let us imagine that a textbook might provide the voice of an editor sitting on the students’ shoulder.

**Editor’s hint**

People often use thinking and feeling verbs when they state an opinion. Here are some examples.

- I think it was the coach’s fault.
- I don’t believe Hendriksen is guilty.
- I feel sorry for Fremmer.

- Check your writing to see if you have used thinking verbs to express your opinion.

In this example, we have an observation involving a particular application of grammar (thinking and feeling verbs) appropriate for the writing project. However, while the grammatical point is introduced in a pragmatic way, the hidden agenda lies in the dot
point (• Check your writing to see if ...). In sending students back to their writing, the text is having them edit their work with a particular focus. As we will see with the following aspects of the project, this is not the only time this occurs. The editing process is iterative. It is focused on a particular aspect of text with each iteration.

Language knowledge

Using references
Knowing how to use language references to find information on writing is a more important skill than learning rules. It is a skill that lasts a lifetime and serves the writer well no matter how language conventions change. The most important references to a writer are the dictionary, the thesaurus and the style guide.

In this example, a point of style raised during the discourse on the text model, is revisited in the context of the student’s writing.

Style Guide

Connectives
In an argument text, a writer needs to link opinions with reasons so the reader will understand and accept the opinion. Connectives are words and phrases that can be used to do this. Here is an example from the text.

Fremmer betrayed Hendriksen in a way that will affect her for life and this is unforgivable.

Without the connectives, this sentence would have been written as three sentences and the ideas would not be linked as well.

• Look up connectives in your Martin’s Young Writers Guide (book or digital version).
• Look for other examples of connectives in the text sample.
• Check your writing to see if you have linked your opinions and your reasons with connectives.

connectives
Connectives are words or phrases that are used to link ideas in clauses, sentences, paragraphs or chapters in a text. They give readers signals to show how ideas in a text are developing.

Sometimes they did not enjoy the training. One reason was that they were often away from their families. Another reason was that some of the training was very uncomfortable. For example, they disliked being spun around in a huge machine like the gravitrone at an amusement park.

If the author had not used connectives in the example above, the ideas in the text would not have made as much sense.

Sometimes they did not enjoy the training.
They were often away from their families.
Some of the training was very uncomfortable.
They disliked being spun around in a huge machine like the gravitrone at an amusement park.

See also conjunctions; explanation.
Note that once again students are sent back to their writing to observe a particular aspect that is relevant to the effectiveness of the writing project. This is a second iteration of the editing process, with the students paying attention to a different text feature – and therefore not seeing it as “I’ve already edited my writing!”

**Word knowledge**
In working at the word level, attention can be drawn to the way in which certain families of words are used. In this case, the student is drawn back to an aspect of verbs introduced earlier through the voice of the ‘editor’. Once again there is use of a reference for another view on a topic, which is then related to the text model.

Finally the student is asked to “Check your writing project to see if …” creating another iteration of the editing process.

**Vocabulary: Topic verbs**
In argument texts such as letters to the editor, writers often use thinking and feeling verbs to express an opinion. Here are some examples from the text.

…in a way I **believe** will affect the sports star…
I sincerely **hope** Hendriksen preserves the friendship.

Look up **verbs** in your **Young Writers Guide** (book or CD version). Discover more about verbs for thinking and feeling.
In a small group, search the text for other examples of thinking and feeling verbs.
Check your writing project to see if you used these verbs when you expressed an opinion in your letter to the editor.
Grammar
Operating once again at the word level, another aspect of grammar is explored – this time, words that allow an author to show emphasis when expressing an opinion. As before, examples are taken from the text model and a writing reference.

**Grammar: Intensifiers**
In an argument, writers often stress their opinion by using words called intensifiers. These words give extra emphasis to the meaning. Here are two examples.

- I am *absolutely* innocent.
- Fremmer is *obviously* upset by the outcome.

- Look up intensifiers in your Martin’s Young Writers Guide. Find out what they are and how writers use them.
- In a small group, search the text sample for other examples of intensifiers.
- Read the examples without the intensifiers and discuss how it changes the meaning of the sentences.
- Check your writing to see if you used intensifiers to stress your opinion or argument.

**Interjections**
Intensifiers are words that emphasise or boost the effect of other words. The most commonly used intensifier is *very*. Intensifiers are usually placed before the word or phrase they emphasise. Some other intensifiers are:

- really, actually, absolutely, extremely, most, best, much, even, quite
- They were *really* scared.

In this example, the intensifier *really* emphasises the adjective *scared*.

- She’s *actually* going to put the fire out.
- The intensifier *actually* emphasises the verb phrase *is going to put*.

Mum says that lemon sauce is delicious. I *absolutely* agree.

The intensifier *absolutely* emphasises the verb *agree*.

- Having a bonfire party is *definitely* out.
- The intensifier *definitely* emphasises the word *out*.

Intensifiers are the opposite of modifiers. See also modifiers.

In going back to check their writing once again, it is highly likely that students will observe their own use of intensifiers and feel some satisfaction from having this recognised, or they will discover a use for them in the context of their writing project. Either way, the topic is being experienced within a context of immediate application by the learner.

Not all of these examples of examining specific language features in use might be explored in a single project, but they demonstrate that any aspect of language can be observed and applied in context. There need never be a reason for the old retort, “Why do we have to learn this stuff … we never use it!”
Publication
The ultimate answer to a learner’s complaint “We never use it” is to arrange for publication of the work. Too often it is believed that publication means a printed copy of writing reaching an audience, but this is a narrow interpretation of the word ‘publish’. The word means ‘to make public’ and the stage, broadcast and recording industries are responsible for ‘making public’ a considerable portion of written text through performance of various kinds. In a literacy sense this involves reading, speaking, listening, fluency and expression.

Let’s examine how our argument texts might be published through performance. The following example not only provides a context that might be within the experience of the learners, but exploits it as a platform for speech coaching and rehearsal to encourage fluency and expression.

### Reaching the Audience

**Performance and publication**
Sometimes debates are held on television. Members of an audience are invited to express their opinions on a topic.

**Action**
- Pretend that you have been invited to take part in a television debate about the World News article *Friend Reports Basketball Drug Cheat*. Practise reading your letter to the editor until you can read it fluently.
- Each day, six people can be chosen to present their opinion to the class. Someone else can be chosen to be the host of the television debate each day and to introduce the speakers.

**Speech hints**
Remember that in your letter to the editor you are presenting an argument. You try to convince the audience that you are correct.
- Underline the key words and phrases in your letter. Give special emphasis at these points so the audience knows what you think is important. You can do this by pausing between each word in a phrase so the audience takes more notice of it.
- Use body language to demonstrate how strongly you believe something. You could:
  - Move your arms to get attention
  - Use your hands to point upwards at an important moment

### The process
How did the process of that project differ from a traditional textbook approach? Fundamentally, the difference lies in the multi-layered contextualisation of all aspects of learning to write.

1. **Understanding the nature and purpose of a text**
   The four levels of questioning a sample text take students beyond the façade of the wording and into the design and purpose of the text.
2. **Understanding the use of structure, grammar, style and technique**
Discourse about the text exposes the author’s tricks of the trade and links specific language knowledge to the author’s purpose or intent.

3. **Employing the writing process**
While the process follows the well-known sequence of ideas > planning > research > drafting > editing, it also has an ebb and flow with the contextualisation of instruction in specific language knowledge throughout the writing process.

4. **Engaging students in the use of various references**
The dictionary, thesaurus and writers guide references, rather than being used in isolation, are drawn into the writing process. Learning to access information is more important than learning rules.

5. **Exploring specific language knowledge**
All instruction in specific language knowledge is contextualised within the project. But the ‘instruction’ is in the form of exploration and application by the students. The only teacher-led instruction is the discourse on the text sample.

6. **Applying the editing process**
The ebb and flow between the specific language activities and the writing process sets up an iterative process in editing. It is not conducted as a one-off event and this is consistent with the way professional editing is conducted in the workplace.

7. **Reading/performing the writing outcome**
The publication of the writing outcome involves rehearsal, focus on expression and style all in the context of a performance – the writer meeting the audience.

**Can one textbook fit all sizes?**
While a textbook might offer an innovative view of the contextualisation of language knowledge in writing, there remains the difficulty that teachers face with the range of students’ developmental levels in any class – particularly given the common incidence of multi-level or composite classes today. One text cannot aspire to serving such a diversity of needs.

Consider having a whole class exploring the same text type and using the same process at the same time. The variable of students’ level of development might be managed by using different text models and activities presented at a variety of levels of complexity. This would not only cater for individual or group needs of pupils, but also the teacher’s need for some aspect of common ground for the sake of classroom management. Everyone might, for example, be reading and writing a character study, but the text resources might be written at different levels of complexity.

So contextualisation of the teaching of writing is achievable in today’s classroom and students need never say “Why do we have to do this stuff – we never use it!”
The final ingredient for success is an element a teacher once showed me when I was a primary student and influenced me so much as a learner that I became a teacher – passion. Passion is contagious and teachers who have a passion for the language have an embedded catalyst that truly makes contextualised learning a very powerful pedagogy.

Bibliography
1. Holdaway, D., *Foundations of Literacy*, Ashton Scholastic, Australia