Little Penguins.
Rodney Martin, re-envisioning process writing

During the IFTE conference the three of us (Helen, Lucinda and Marcus) attended a presentation by Rodney Martin, Editor and Director of Era Publications. His presentation, *Teaching children to solve problems rather than learn rules*, was described as focusing on "the teacher's role as helping children to see strengths and weaknesses in their writing rather than teaching rules." The combination of practical emphasis and promised "insights into the use of grammar as a tool to make meaning in writing" was irresistible.

What struck us about the Martin presentation was the extension it gave to what is now known (often dismissively) as the 'process writing' approach.   In simple terms this is an approach which grew out of the research work of Donald Graves and Lucy Calkins, Don Murray, and Nancie Atwell. These teachers and researchers wanted to encourage students writing in classrooms to see themselves as writers; 'students learning to be writers, not just learning to write'. In essence, it was a move from form to content; they sought to free student's writing, particularly creative writing, from the dominant emphasis on superficial features such as spelling, grammar, and presentation (neatness, legibility) and focus on the ideas, the content. The process writing movement encouraged teachers to re-view the students in their rooms and to move away from a discourse of deficit to one of achievement and ability. A critical part of this was to abandon teacher directed tasks, and to encourage students to select their own topics, ("choice is the essence of fine art"; Graves, 1983:255) and to let children drop topics and pieces that weren't working, in much the way professional writers do.

Graves' research identified the stages of the writing process and provided examples of how even very young students rehearse their writing, famously identifying the use of drawing prior to writing as rehearsal or drafting. It was the work of Graves and other process theorists which encouraged teachers to talk and teach about areas such as audience and 'voice', (now highly contested – for example Barnsley, 1997, Lensmire, 1994, 2000, 2001) and to employ a conferencing process.

Process writing theorists taught that children learn to write by writing ("the writing process is discovered by doing it"; Graves, 1983:250). In support of this Graves and others identified a recursive model of writing which emphasised rehearsal or pre-writing,

composing/drafting, revising, proofreading and publishing. In this context, the use of publishing terms served to underline the authenticity of the student's work.

Martin, as a professional publisher, takes these now familiar ideas and terms and rejuvenates them, injecting freshness into process writing, but remaining squarely within its boundaries. He connects the purpose of writing to the process of making meaning by suggesting that teachers, like editors, are responsible for assisting writers to develop work that achieves its purpose when presented. Martin suggests that editorial roles could be used in a classroom context to make the writing process akin to that of a publishing house.

The editing roles in a publishing house are: the commissioning editor, the structural editor, the copyeditor and the proofreader. The commissioning editor solicits manuscripts and makes decisions based on the audience and intended purpose of the writing, just as a teacher sets writing activities that students respond to. The structural editor examines the manuscripts' "communication of the topic, theme, text type/format, organization/structure and style" (Martin, 2003:3). The structural editor focuses on the characters, setting, plot, style and theme when editing fiction texts, and the integrity of the information, the clarity and logic of the structure, and relevance of information, style and format in nonfiction texts. The copyeditor is concerned with the grammar, punctuation and style to ensure the text achieves its purpose. The teacher does the work of structural and copy editor when responding to drafts. The proofreader identifies and corrects errors prior to publication, repeating many of the above practices. Martin notes that in classrooms the student's editorial function is often limited to proofreading, and the teacher functions as commissioning, structural and copy editor.

Martin observes that professional authors find it difficult to edit their own work, and that the focus on proofreading over other editing functions in the classroom creates unrealistic expectations. To promote higher levels of structural thinking, rather than editing around the text, teachers should encourage students:

- to undergo significant pre-writing activities involving brainstorm sessions, research and discussion of audience and purpose;
- to share and discuss text models of particular text types or genres and identify the elements of their framework or structure;
- to become familiar with patterns of narrative and non-narrative texts through shared reading;
- to storyboard their intended texts by planning the contents page (nonfiction) or diagramming the order of events in a plot (fiction).

(Martin, 2003:4)

Authors use a range of resources to solve problems when writing, such as reference books or other media (e.g. dictionaries, thesauruses, and style guides), drafting and referring to other writers or notes for ideas, and conferring with readers (e.g. friends, colleagues, etc) and editors. They also create an environment where writing occurs in a particular time and place, and they have access to resources they need. As authors are able to refer to different resources, so too should our students, hence they need to be familiar with the dictionary, thesaurus, and the classroom equivalent of a style guide. Another way to promote effective writing habits is to discuss different aspects of writing as a class and display rules and strategy information around the classroom. Martin notes that:

> It is easier to teach someone how to use a dictionary, than to teach the spelling and meaning of every word in the dictionary. It is easier to teach someone how to use a style guide than to teach all the writing conventions and text types. Teach children how to find answers and how to solve writing problems, and their skills are relevant regardless of change and remain with them for life. (Martin, 2003:3-4)

Classroom strategies to explore fiction texts should focus on five aspects; characters (who, what), setting (where, when), plot (what happens), style (how it sounds), and theme (the underlying meaning). Martin illustrated this through an example of the text *Arthur* (1984), which evolved from a manuscript about an ordinary bread bun to a story about a dog determined to be special, that reportedly became the most popular children's book in Australia in 1984 and was shortlisted for the Australian Picture Book of the Year award in 1985. The decision of the commissioning editor, and then the input of subsequent editorial work, developed the text, and these processes would be useful for students to develop their own writing in the classroom context. Mitchell (1999) notes that students are often reluctant to write or edit drafts, but we believe that this process engages the reluctant writer by offering students an opportunity to receive input from the first stage of the writing. Hence as long as there are words on a page the students can use editing strategies to develop the writing.

By taking on different editorial roles the students would learn about the way decisions are made in the publishing world, and peer editing also has an element of reciprocity in that students model learning behaviours (McInerney and McInerney, 2002:277). The students would be able to reflect on how they, as writers and editors, develop texts and learn about the writing process, and a side effect is that peer editing develops strategies in students, enabling the teacher to teach English content as well as transferable skills.

Classroom strategies to explore non-fiction texts would use the editorial roles, however the focus of activities should be on elements of the writing such as grammar, the text structure, and checking facts. The class, to understand the different functions of language, could examine various models or examples of non-fiction texts to determine different ways to write information, before the students create their own text. Using a style guide and English language resources (e.g. *Young Writers Guide*, 2002), students could investigate analyses of this form of writing while at the same time learn about word functions (e.g. grammar) and the decisions writers make (e.g. selection of words, how information is presented, how the author positions the audience).

The purpose of teaching students to become editors has a two-fold effect – students' texts develop over the different stages of writing, and at the same time the students learn about the processes of using different writing conventions, using different resources to create texts (e.g. drafting and referring to others' and using reference books), and developing texts for different purposes and audiences.

As suggested earlier, there are two highly contested aspects of the process writing approach, one is the notion of audience, the other of voice. As Lankshear and Snyder observe, "schools create their own versions of social practices" (2000:44) and the idea of audience is such an example. Barnsley writes: "attempts to construe out-of-school writing audiences from a within-school context, through role play or writing for assumed audiences, for example, are problematic to say the least." (1995:33). Even as we tell students that they need to consider the audience for whom they are writing, for example, a newspaper editor in a letter to the editor, they know that they also write for a second, hidden audience, the teacher/assessor.

Nonetheless the significance of audience is great in two ways, the first, as Graves et al discovered, in being a way of flagging to students that the purpose of almost all writing is communication, and therefore almost always presupposes a reader besides self who needs to be considered. The idea of audience is valuable in persuading students to 'show not tell' their descriptions, their characters, their story. Secondly, as the CSF highlights, 'audience' is a central part of learning to 'read' the writing of others, particularly non-fiction texts which suppose an audience either in agreement or dissent; writing tactics are developed accordingly.

The idea of voice is more contentious, but we believe offers a point of connection with more contemporary theory. As Lensmire (1994, 2000, 2001) suggests, voice is very

far from being a neutral or unproblematic thing. In process writing theory, voice is the voice of individual expression. It belongs to one person, a fixed, stable entity; Graves writes "the voice is the frame of the window through which the information is seen" (1983:228). Voice is (literally and figuratively) transparent, neutral, "the unique expression of the unique individual" (Lensmire 64:200).

Lensmire reminds us of a second, quite different conception of voice, arising from critical pedagogy.   The 'voice' envisaged by critical pedagogy (Giroux, McLaren in America, Kamler in Australia) is "assumed to be necessarily partial, to express a particular position on the world that will make possible certain understandings and constrain others" (Lensmire 2000:67). However, critical theorists are confident that students can be encouraged to examine and question their own partiality. Although both theories share a belief in affirming students own experiences, the significant difference is between a voice which is open to being questioned (critical pedagogy) and a voice which we celebrate but do not critique (process writing).

We feel that there are two issues arising from both conceptions of voice. The first is pragmatic, and is what Lensmire has identified as the "conflict and risk" (2000:70) which arises between students and teachers, "who, in expressing themselves, find themselves at odds." (2000:69) As Lensmire recognises, such conflict has consequences for the "actual production of speech and writing within the classroom" (2000:68).   He identifies the fact that "peers loom large within classrooms that forego tight control of student bodies and talk." (2000:70) and that students, especially unpopular students, "feel there are serious risks involved in writing for and speaking in front of peers" (2000:70). The classrooms envisioned by both process and critical theorists has never accounted for this. We feel however, that any attempt in 2003 to reintroduce elements of a process writing approach must factor in such conflict and risk.

The second issue is a theoretical one, related to what Buckingham has called "political evangelism" (1998:11) and McDonald identifies as "a form of moralism" (1999:13), that is teacher practice which locates the issues from which conflict arises, for example sexism or racism, *within* the student; teacher practice which identifies the *student* as the place to effect the change, rather than perceiving such issues as a "social identity" (McDonald, 1999:13). It is implicitly a notion of individual deficit tied to a 'corrective imperative'.

We feel however, that by embracing what might be termed a 'post modern'[1] sensibility, that is the idea that human relationships are an engagement "with others in meaning making" (Dahlberg et al, 1999:23), we can reconceive of classrooms as *communities* within which meaning is constructed and negotiated. This links to what Lyotard has talked about as "'little narratives', forms of local knowledge, which are internal to the communities within which they occur" (Dahlberg et al, 1999:24). We feel this offers a powerful affirmation of a writing classroom structured around the collaborative work our reading of Martin envisages, and one which in Dahlberg's terms "recognises, even welcomes, uncertainty, complexity, diversity, non-linearity, subjectivity, multiple perspectives" (22).

This in turn, enables us to build on Lensmire's idea of "voice as a project involving appropriation, social struggle, and becoming" (2000:76). As Lensmire puts it:

> There is no way to fashion the new without the appropriation of the old. There is no opportunity for affirmation from your audience and the energy of collaboration without the risk of rejection, and there is no chance to become who you want to become, to speak with a voice that is yours – even as that voice sounds with the voices of others with whom you've learned and struggled – without the pain that often accompanies saying *this*, and not *that*. Students need others if their voices are to continue to develop." (2000:84; italics in original).

What this means in theoretical and practical terms is that we conceive of a teaching practice in which we can accept that "there may be no rational way to convert to our point of view people who honestly hold other positions, [and that] we cannot short-circuit such disagreements." (Toulmin, cited in Dahlberg et al, 1999:27). Underpinning this is an optimism that "later on these differences may be resolved by further shared experience" (Toulmin, cited in Dahlberg et al, 1999:27).

We have adapted Martin's strategies for getting students to review their writing in the belief that by enabling them to locate their contradictions, students may, not *resolve* them, but, in negotiation within the classroom community, choose to privilege some over others in support of a more tolerant, more inclusive community. This is the position Threadgold proposes when she comments: "If … a student continues to express ideas about social reality that differ from the teachers then surely the argument about "offering students different positions from which to read" has to allow her that position. … you cannot change habits by force, or the world in one lesson." (1997:377).

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[1] As Dahlberg et al observe there are real problems with identifying anything as 'post modern' given that "by even speaking of "postmodernism", [we] run the risk of violating some of its central values – heterogeneity, multiplicity or rules and difference". (Flak cited in Dahlberg et al, 1999:27).

We feel then, that Martin offers a fresh way into the practices of process writing which we can link to a more contemporary, 'post modern' subjectivity in both writer and teacher, one which may be more potent in accommodating "human diversity complexity and contingency" (Dahlberg, 1999:22).

Rationale and Reflection

After attending the eighth International Federation for the Teaching of English (IFTE) Conference in 2003, and participating in workshops about aspects of English education, Martin's presentation became a point of reflection for the three of us. The take on process writing was subtle yet very powerful, and the practical implications for the classroom were clearly evident. We believe that the 'student as editor' concept would benefit students, as taking on editorial roles would encourage discussion in the classroom and provide students with strategies that they could use throughout their schooling.

The tasks for this assessment were: to investigate an aspect of English education relevant to teachers, present the information in the form of a poster, and then write a theoretical report on the educational relevance and underpinnings of the information. The paper that Martin presented was called *Writing & Grammar: Teaching Children to Solve Problems Rather Than Learn Rules*. The poster was based on our interpretation of this paper, and we decided to focus on the information we considered was the most relevant to the classroom environment. The information (both process writing theory and Martin's paper) was developed as a practical classroom strategy – with the students taking on the different editorial roles, applying them to their own and peers work. There was a conscious effort to make the information accessible and something that other teachers could engage with and encourage in classrooms. The theoretical report endeavoured to support our interpretation of process writing theories.

The end product of our discussions meant that we adapted the theory into a practical consideration of process writing by elaborating on the central concept of 'student as editor'. This concept could be used by classroom teachers during writing activities. This assignment has put us in the position of teachers who use theory to inform classroom practice.

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