VATE Teaching Writing Today

A Collaborative Study

Final Report

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Introduction

The VATE Teaching Writing Today Study was undertaken as the result of a successful funding bid by Deakin University and a group of allied teacher researchers in 2018, for funds made available through VATE for research into the teaching of English. This report describes the study, outcomes and issues encountered and makes recommendations for future such studies.

Background

The successful funding bid, with a budget of $2920, reduced after negotiation with VATE, was announced on 14 May 2018, and a start date at the end of July was negotiated. Ethics approval was sought and obtained through Deakin's internal faculty ethics process (see Appendix One), and then the Department of Education and all Catholic Education Office dioceses. The actual estimated start date for carrying out the empirical research aspect of the project was 15 November 2018, and the estimated finish date was 15 November 2019, although the final project outcome, the presentation at the AATE/VATE conference in December 2019 needed to be completed before this final report could be prepared.

Project Description

This qualitative study, focusing on the teaching of writing, sought to answer the following question:

- How are Victorian English teachers designing curriculum for teaching writing?

The study also addressed the following sub-questions:

- What resources do teachers draw on in this work?

- How is this work perceived to have changed over time?

- What are the various discourses and practices involved, both in planning itself and in chosen pedagogies?

- How do teachers perceive students are faring as emergent writers in the curriculum contexts described?

- What different kinds of professionalism are enacted in this work?

Project Methodology

This was a collaborative study, with five teachers in schools and a university academic represented as co-researchers. The teachers gave input and feedback where possible (for example by trialling the survey, and reading and responding to anonymised data), and the university academic managed the project, compiled feedback and wrote the ethics proposal. In line with ethical requirements and the protection of anonymity for teacher participants in the study, the academic researcher conducted interviews in schools and summarised or anonymised data circulated.

First, we conducted **a literature review** of journals focused on the teaching of subject English to inform the study. We used this review to refine survey questions. We then provided **a survey** link to all VATE members. As we only had five responses, we were able to **interview and do school visits** with all five teachers, so that **five snapshots of practice** could be based on the surveys, and then **five deeper case studies** could be developed based on visits and interviews. The five schools represented the government and Catholic/private sectors and both urban and rural schools.

Project Findings

In summary, we found that the Victorian English teachers in the study are:

- drawing on a wide range of resources for planning to teach writing, including peers, cross-disciplinary peers, formal networks, purchased resources such as text or reference books, and online resources such as hashtags and blogs.

- Keen to do the best they can for their students in relation to developing their writing abilities, but conflicted in the ways their desired practice clashes with what is required by assessment regimes such as NAPLAN.

- Operating in highly formulaic environments, where prescribed writing pedagogies involving rigid scaffolding are understood to give fast-track access to idealised (but not necessarily better) forms of syntax and organisation, when more effective writing might be better learnt in more exploratory ways. Student pride in dexterity in these kinds of literacy achievements was complicated by teacher perceptions that students are not enjoying writing in high stakes environments.

- Concerned about the way students' capacity to think is being limited by excessive scaffolding, yet there are not clearly articulated pedagogies for moving students beyond scaffolds, or avoiding them altogether when appropriate.

- Enacting an ambivalent professionalism that complies, subtly resists, and longs for a different way in the teaching of writing.

Project Outcomes

The designated project outcomes were:

- attending a minimum of one VATE Professional Learning and Research Committee meeting;

- presenting at the AATE/VATE conference;

- completing a report of progress, and

- having one article ready for submission to a journal.

All project stages and outcomes have been completed, with the required reports made to the VATE Professional Learning and Research Committee, a presentation given at the VATE/AATE conference and three articles now under anonymous peer review from the

study, as well as a fourth in preparation. The presentations at the Professional Learning and Research Committee allowed for guidance and suggestions from committee members, and a focus on TEEL was suggested (14/3/2019), along with flagging potential for a VATE Discussion Paper on standardisation of practice (19/8/2019).

Furthermore, the teacher researchers have appreciated the opportunity to be involved in the study. Some of the outcomes for them are the professional learning gained from shared discussions and emails; the publications; the capacity to reflect, including in writing, offered by the study; and participating as a presenter at the VATE conference, when this is something they may never have done before and not felt very confident about. For teachers involved as participants, these comments demonstrate how they have felt:

- *Thank you once again for selecting me to participate in your study. I have already gained inspiration from it.*
- *Thank you once again for the opportunity to discuss my teaching practice. As a passionate professional, it was a welcome experience to chat with someone who has maintained their curiosity about the learning process and the strategies that work best for students.*

Project Outputs

1. Joint presentation/workshop at the AATE/VATE conference, by Lucinda McKnight, Helen Billett, Andrea Hayes, Elisse Hay and Tim Mannix, delivered Sunday 1 December, 2019:

Super Writing Activity Team to the Rescue Workshop Abstract

Join our SWAT team of expert teachers for an intensive workshop trialling hands-on practical writing activities for students in Years 7-12. SWAT usually stands for Special Weapons and Tactics; here we

reveal our own successful teaching strategies for student success, blasting away tired formulae and templates with high calibre alternatives. Featuring tabletop games for storytelling; Writer's Notebook especially for early career teachers; VCE specials; biopoems; non prescriptive rubrics; visual stimuli for creative responses; commonplace books; Novel in a Day and much more. Includes key findings of VATE's Teaching Writing Today study. Includes key findings from VATE's 2018-19 Teaching Writing Today study.

This presentation was well attended, with over 30 participants, and the resource list emerging from the study was distributed to all present, and made available on the conference website.

2. The articles sharing research findings are:

- "Hard, joyous work: A literature review of teaching writing", by entire project team, submitted to *English in Australia,* currently under review

- "Since feeling is first: The art of teaching to write paragraphs" by Lucinda McKnight, submitted to *English in Education,* currently under review

- "Teaching writing by formula: Empowerment or exclusion", by Lucinda McKnight, submitted to *The International Journal of Inclusive Education,* currently under review

- "Super Writing Activity Team to the Rescue: VATE/AATE 2019" (in draft) by Lucinda McKnight, Helen Billett, Andrea Hayes, Elisse Hay and Tim Mannix, to be submitted to *IDIOM* conference issue.

Copies of all articles will be sent to VATE on publication. VATE is listed as the funding body where necessary for all publications.

3. Further outputs include:

- a series of recommendations (Appendix A) for VATE council and Professional Learning and Research Committee.

- a list of resources (Appendix B) used in the teaching of writing, distributed at the conference and potentially available via the VATE website.

- Further articles planned for development in 2020.

Funds Expended

Our project budget was $2920. This budget included, as the main item, CRT funding for the five teachers involved in the study, but in the end only one of our teachers wanted to use the funding, as others were too busy or did not need it due to timing. We used Deakin facilities for phone conferencing and a private car for some of the travel, further reducing costs. Our ultimate expenditure was: $1,548.26.

Project Challenges

Key challenges in conducting this study included:

- Delays caused by coordinating such a large team of researchers, including busy teachers. However, this was offset by the value of having diverse voices and contexts on the research team. It was especially useful that the research team spanned urban and rural schools, and the state, Catholic and private sectors. However, we have still managed to complete the project prior to the final outcome, the AATE conference presentation.

- Delays of some months in receiving approval from external bodies following submission of applications, in particular the Catholic Education Office. This meant that the survey went out months later than planned. However, we have still managed to complete the project prior to the final outcome, the AATE conference presentation.

- Very low survey response rate. This may be because teachers were intimidated by the extent of approvals required, which were sought at the outset, timing, or other reasons. It is also possible that teachers are unsure about participating in such studies,

unless merely completing entirely anonymous surveys. One of the participating teachers contacted the academic researcher after the interview to request disregarding what she had said about NAPLAN and testing, as she felt her school would not approve; this gives a sense of the climate in which these teachers are operating. Teacher researchers also felt that some of the writing that this study has generated, including their own, is "dangerous". While the ethics application did not anticipate highly contentious matters being discussed, it seems that in the current climate, speaking out about the teaching of writing is more fraught than anticipated, so care has needed to be taken in developing publications.

Conclusion

The VATE Teaching Writing Today collaborative study has raised a number of pressing issues in relation to the teaching of writing in Victoria. These include the items discussed in the recommendations to council and the Professional Learning Committee (Appendix A). While the low response rate to the survey was disappointing, the five small case studies emerging from the project provided rich data for understanding how these five teachers are teaching writing today, which have implications for those in other contexts. The project was completed on time, in relation to the actual estimate for the empirical research, and below the designated budget. All outcomes were successfully met, and also exceeded, with four papers (rather than one) emerging already from the study, along with the recommendations (Appendix A) and list of resources (Appendix B).

Appendix A: Recommendations

1. Make the list of resources (Appendix B) for the teaching of writing emerging from the study available via the VATE website, to demonstrate the variety of influences informing practice.

2. Consider funding further research into the effects of excessive scaffolding on the development of students' writing abilities. This study has focused on teachers and teacher perceptions, so further research involving students would be beneficial.

3. Find ways through all VATE's publication and professional learning offerings to expose teachers to the contested history of the use of formulas in the teaching of writing, as discussed in the publications arising from this study. Also to the diversity of practice: there are schools where teachers have hardly even heard of TEEL, and others where it is mandated in every piece of writing.

4. Find ways to expose teachers to the contested evidence for the benefits of scaffolding, as they are impelled to implement evidence-based approaches, for example by building this into VATE's *Beyond TEEL* sessions.

5. Find ways to model other approaches to the teaching of writing to teachers/develop new approaches with teachers, especially those foregrounding writer's workshop, process and pleasure.

6. Promote the use of student choice, authentic audiences and genuine publication for writing, and the benefits of this, to teachers, as in the contexts in the study, this had largely been abandoned, if it was ever present.

7. Consider how teachers can *explicitly* help students move beyond scaffolds, when they are used and develop specific professional learning opportunities in this area. The focus here needs to be, as one teacher says, on supporting "depth and complexity" in student writing.

8. Conduct further research into inclusive pedagogies for writing, which do not stymie students who are already fluent and well organised writers, but that also give other students the opportunity to experience success in moving away from speaking registers.

9. Foreground the concerns expressed in the study (and in the literature) about formulaic writing affecting students' ability to think, and making them dependent on both teachers and models. What are we denying students, when we force them to write to formulas?

10. Link professional learning around the teaching of writing to the development of students as excellent writers, not as compliant reproducers of formulas. The incorporation of 21st century skills discourses may be useful here, as the kind of writing students are doing in schools is very different from the more process orientated (drafting, editing, proofing, giving feedback, collaborating etc) writing they will do in the workplace.

11. Promote the teaching of writing in digital contexts, which was largely absent from the practice of the teachers in the study, yet is the kind of writing that students are likely to be doing in the future: for example, writing web content; writing design documentation; using multimodal literacies; writing virtual reality scripts; designing website architecture and so on.

12. Recognise the binds in which teachers find themselves, due to assessment regimes that value spurious forms of writing and school league tables, professional achievement plans etc. that rely on these. For teachers to listen, their perspectives and needs must be valued; the teachers in this study were aware of more diverse, student and process centred methods of practice, but generally felt under too much time and outcome pressure to be able to follow them regularly.

13. Recognise school and teacher-peer context as vital to the development of effective writing pedagogies, and consider professional learning that develops collaborative cultures of sharing and debate in schools.

14. Develop a VATE Discussion Paper on the standardisation of practice in the teaching of writing, that assists VATE to achieve some of the above, and is available via the website.

15. Explore avenues for advocacy re current assessment regimes mandating what has been called, in the UK, "teaching bad writing".

Appendix B: List of Resources

Resources used by teacher participants and teacher researchers: Teaching Writing Today Study

The following resources were mentioned as useful places to find ideas and pedagogies for the teaching of writing by either teacher participants in the study, who completed surveys and were interviewed, or by teacher co-researchers in discussions around the study. We note the diversity and range of resources drawn on by individual teachers, and the work of selection and adaptation that accompanies their usage.

Social Resources

Colleagues (including from other disciplines eg. art teacher)

Peer networks

Local networks

Teacher networks

VATE (especially VCE sessions)

School Resources/Interventions

Library/librarians

Literature Club

Writers' Club (all ages and students) for regular, low-stakes writing

Genre-targeted library shelves (ie. not Dewey) and book/fanfiction writing clubs

Writers' Resource Centre (separate from library) ie. Designated space in school for writing

Write a Novel in a Day whole school program

High expectations in junior text lists, so students are exposed to rich and complex language

Writing Every Lesson

Hand-on, fun, workshop activities at all levels, such as cut and paste; highlighter activities; making burgers in home ec room to demonstrate paragraphing; sensory bags; meditative walks

Creative Writing Club

Scaffolding booklets with a range of differentiated models

Print Texts

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100 Quickwrites by Linda Rief

Best of the Best (Crown Publishing)

Closing the Vocabulary Gap by Alex Quigley

Connect Education resources

Education Perfect (only within a learning sequence, highly contextualised by teacher pre-teaching and then development in an actual activity/piece of writing, not as an end in itself, but as practice for a specifically taught skill in a minilesson scenario- max ten minutes in a lesson)

Fast and Effective Feedback Strategies Glenn Pearsall

Literacy for Learning resources (Brian Dare)

Literature (for example Alan Marshall's *I Can Jump Puddles*, Joan London's *The Golden Age*, Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*)

Literature Teachers' Toolbox Glenn Pearsall

Making Every English Lesson Count by Andy Tharby

Mini-lessons for Literature Circles by Daniels and Steineke

Peer sourced and generated resources (including from other disciplines eg. art teacher)

Spelling it Out by Misty Adoniou

Steps to Success (Macmillan Publishing)

Teach Like a Champion 2.0 By Doug Lemov

Textbooks, such as Insight, Pearson and Oxford.

The Writing Revolution by Judith C. Hochman and Natalie Wexler

VCE Examiners' Reports

Writing Better Sentences (Ticking Minds)

For creative writing:

101 Creative Writing Exercises by Melissa Donovan

Writing Tools: 50 Essential Strategies for Every Writer by Roy Peter Clark

*The Writing Strategies Boo*k Jennifer Serravallo

How Fiction Works James Wood

Websites/Platforms

Wheeler Centre (and programs) https://www.wheelercentre.com/

Lisa Tran's study hacks: see for eg. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCkH6-sgIxWjGb0kAaybyzew Her top ten!

Wattpad: Where stories live https://www.wattpad.com/

Fanfiction sites relevant to kids' favourite tv shows and films

National Novel Writing Month https://www.nanowrimo.org/

Authors

Author visits: Especially Tristan Bancks and Oliver Phommavanh

Twitter Accounts to Follow

Kat Howard @SaysMiss

Paul Moss @EdMerger

Tom Bennett @tombennett71

Tom Sherrington @Teacherhead

Annabel Astbury @AnnabelAstbury

Litdrive UK @LitdriveUK

Kate McCabe @evenbetterif

Rebecca Foster @TLPMsF

Stuart Lock @StuartLock

X Curtis @Xris32

Team English @Team_English1

Bill Lucas @LucasLearn

Daisy Christodoulou @daisychristo

VATE @VATE_English

AATE @englishteachers

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