This article was first presented by Australian children’s author Mem Fox as a plenary address at a conference at the University of Wollongong in June 2000. The audience was captivated. We laughed with Mem. We cried with her. But, most important, we came away with some strong reminders about writing and the teaching of writing. Requests for copies of the paper have been ongoing, and so when Mem agreed that I could have a copy for Reading Online, I believed that it would be selfish of us to keep it to ourselves.

In preparing the paper for publication here I thought it important to maintain the sense of an oral presentation. Therefore, it has been kept in the first person with very few changes made to it. I hope that readers can hear the passion, the caring, and the fun that Mem expressed when she presented this paper to the conference audience.

Jan Turbill
Department Editor, International Perspectives

Radical Surgery in the Writing Curriculum: Replacing the Meaningless with the Meaningful

Mem Fox

Learning to Be a Writer: The Wagga Wagga Writers’ Workshop

In 1981 at the Riverina College in Wagga Wagga, NSW, Australia, I took a 5-day course for teachers of writing, and the life-changing part of it was that every morning, instead of talking about the teaching of writing, we wrote.

Our writing teacher didn’t stand up at the front of our class and say, “Writers need readers or listeners.” Nor did she say, “It’s readers or listeners who cause writers to put pen to paper in the first place.” Neither did she say, “It’s readers or listeners who provide writers with the twin factors of fear and hope, without which good writing never happens.” Instead she said -- as if it were an unimportant item of administration -- that in the final session we’d be reading aloud to the rest of the group a piece we’d be writing during the week. We glanced at each other and put our hands over our mouths in freak-out fashion. We were there to learn about the teaching of writing, for heaven’s sake! We weren’t there to write!

But wrote we did. Every morning. We wrote and wrote, and wrote some more, and rewrote again. And every night we rewrote again. Hope and fear worked their magic on our writing. How we cared! How we dreaded the reaction of our peers! How we feared the public exposure! How we hoped for a gratifying response! We forgot to phone home. We skipped meals. We rushed to our rooms at every opportunity, absorbed by our writing, maddened by it. We tore up terrible drafts in fright and started

Related Postings from the Archives

- [Opportunities for Teenagers to Share Their Writing Online](#)
- [Wired Writers](#)
- [An Approach to Factual Writing](#)
- [Writing and Communication Technologies](#)

http://www.readingonline.org/international/inter_index.asp?HREF=fox/index.html
again. We crossed out the unnecessary and we added the essential. To make paragraphs connect more logically we literally cut and pasted with scissors and sticky tape: 1981 was before the use of personal computers, if you recall. We worried always about the moment when we'd have to read to the others what we had written.

In the afternoons we talked about teaching writing, based on the morning experience of being writers ourselves. What do writers need, we asked? What do they long for? What makes them write? What stops them from writing? What makes them hate it? What helps them improve? What is our role as teachers? Our discussions were intense, and our ideas clean and bright, illuminated by our own daily struggle to write.

I jokingly called my piece “What I Did in My Holidays” and, as I read it to the group, the papers shook in my hand like a frightened bird and I kept gulping air to find the breath to read with -- so important was the event, so terrifying the moment.

Being a writer in Wagga Wagga provided me with the fundamental understanding that the more writers care about their readers, the more writers fear their readers, the more writers hope for from their readers, the more effectively they will write.

I was a real writer in Wagga Wagga, and I learned a great deal from that experience. I hadn't published a book at that time. My first book, *Possum Magic*, came out 2 years later, in 1983, followed by *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* in 1984, then all of a tumble, the rest. And each book taught me more about being a writer, which taught me more about being a better teacher of writing.

**Learning to Write from My Writing**

Yet these books -- this “Big” writing, if you like -- and my Wagga Wagga writing weren’t the only occasions that taught me what I needed to know as a teacher of writing. The “Small and Pathetic” writing I’ve engaged in over many years, and the Small and Pathetic writing I’ve received from my friends and family, has been just as important as the big stuff in instructing me how to behave better as a teacher in the writing classroom. So my intention in this talk is to expand on the insights I’ve gained from various experiences of writing and to bring them all together in a way that may point our writing curriculum in a new and totally unexpected direction.

I happen to be writing a book for adults at the moment, a self-help book for parents of children aged from birth to 5 years. [Editor’s note: The book, *Reading Magic*, was published in 2001, subsequent to Mem delivering this talk. Mem’s Web site features information and excerpts, as well as audio files of Mem reading aloud from it.] It’s about the importance of reading aloud to children before they start school, about bonding with children through books, about children bonding to books, about accidental literacy before school, about the reading process and raising a brighter child, and all that stuff. I’m currently on the eighth draft of this 60,000-word book. I’ve been writing it and rewriting it since April 1998.

Why am I rewriting so often? I rewrite because I’m extremely nervous about my readers and their reactions. I’m hoping like mad they won’t pick up any old message, but the precise message I’m trying to put across. I wouldn’t want them to start doing mad things like teaching their children formally, for instance. Heaven forbid! I don’t want to be boring either. Or confusing. Nor do I want my readers to be hungry for hints I might have forgotten to provide, or to have to scrubble through ill-assorted paragraphs for information that might be vital, or to be put off by incomprehensible jargon or to have to wade through long sentences which are muddied by seriousness and pomposity. Nor do I want them to have to suffer a sickly sweet kind of writing riddled with useless, self-help clichés.
I’m like a kid wanting to please a favorite grandfather. I want to write the kind of writing that reads like a novel you can’t put down. I want to inspire, to inform, challenge, entertain, and be useful to my readers. If I am truthful with myself, I want to change the world, so I’m reorganizing big ideas, and fiddling constantly with small phrases, and writing and rewriting like a mad composer who can’t leave his (or her) score alone. I rewrite so often that on many days I cut more than I add. My readers are killing me with fright and hope, and as I die at my desk my writing happens to be improving out of sight, even at my age, even as a woman with all my accumulated writing experience since 1981. Readers make writing matter.

Small and Pathetic Writing: What It Can Teach

Small and Pathetic writing also teaches me important lessons on how to become a better teacher in the writing classroom.

The certificate. On one Saturday this year, I read a full-page article in a weekend Australian newspaper about writers of picture books in Australia. I wasn’t mentioned once. It was shattering. I cried over this article. And while my fragile state may have had something to do with my beloved husband, Malcolm, having just been through open-heart surgery, the absence of my name sent me into a deep depression and self doubt -- even at my age, even as a woman of my writing experience. I sent a self-pitying fax to my literary agent in Melbourne, who’s cheaper than a psychologist, telling her I felt I was a fading star, that clearly my career was over, the lights were out, the curtain was coming down, and so on.

That night I received a fax from my agent telling me to pull myself together. She hastened to point out that the article was written in Sydney by a Sydney journalist and that Sydney journalists think nothing ever happens west of the Blue Mountains, let alone in another state and city like my home town of Adelaide, and surely I knew that. And would I mind, please, waiting until the latest sales of Koala Lou arrived in the Monday morning post before I carried on about being a fading star?

“God, she’s brilliant,” said Malcolm. “She really is a brilliant agent. It’s 11:47 p.m. her time, and it’s a Saturday night as well.”

So the next day I wrote this for my agent, Jenny. Malcolm signed it, and I sent it off.
I made the certificate because I hoped Jenny would love it. I messed about for ages with the font and its size, with the spacing and the setting out, and with the sentiments expressed in it, fearful that it wasn’t good enough to get my message across. I wasted a lot of time on the certificate when I should have been writing more important things like this paper. But did I care? I was grinning to myself the whole time. I was working on it, imagining Jenny taking it from her fax machine and smiling and feeling good about herself. And all this set me wondering....

How can writers write if they can’t imagine a reader reacting to the essence of what they have written? Why would writers hug themselves in anticipation without the promise of a reader and a reader’s response at the end of the writing road? The certificate I made was trivial, an excellent example of the Small-and-Pathetic genre, but even so it taught me that for writers, readers are the after-dinner mints of the writing process. Readers make writing deliciously worthwhile.

Jenny, my agent, claims she’s going to frame the certificate. She says the only people in the world who ever say, “Well done!” are her personal trainer and me, so I’m glad I made effort.

**Other Small and Pathetic writing.** Malcolm and I have one child, Chloë, who is a freelance journalist in Paris and a mistress of the art of Small and Pathetic writing. She works at the international news-gathering agency, Agence France Press, so on Malcolm’s birthday she wrote him a greeting set out in the genre of an AFP news report:

---

**Birthday - Fox**

**Person turns 55 in birthday shock**

*Adelaide March 15th (AFP)*

A person already in his middle age officially aged again, it was reported here Wednesday. A sprightly travel-obsessed academic, Malcolm Fox of Brighton, said he was “delighted” by the news.
“Every year I get older means I get closer to seniors’ discounts on major airlines,” he said.

When informed that no such discounts existed, he claimed it was “only a matter of time.”

Fox’s dog, Ajax, an elderly terrier, could not comment as he was asleep and did not hear the questions anyway. Fox’s wife is said to be “making a video” of the birthday celebrations.

The median age in Adelaide is 103.

On her own birthday Chloë sent us an e-mail about herself written for no reason but to amuse her friends and us. It was in the genre of a question-and-answer interview which summed up her life so far. One of the questions was “Do you get along with your parents?” to which she had replied, “Yeeees, rather well, except always feel a bit like a second string in their 31-year love affair.”

In a panic I hurled myself on to the computer in an effort to stem the irreparable psychological damage caused by her being a member of our family for 29 disturbing years:

My darling,

I have never laughed so much over an e-mail in my life as I did over the one you sent about yourself on the night of your birthday. I had to take my glasses off three times to wipe my eyes. Of course there were real tears too because you are so completely gorgeous.

I adored and felt very complimented by what you said about Poppy and me, but being the “second string” wasn’t the instrument I would have described you as, from my doting perspective. Oh no. You are the first violin, and a Stradivarius at that. The mighty tuba. The third arm of the -- ting! -- triangle, the roll of the drums, the mad maracas, the Steinway, the fortissimo, the andante, the Herbert von Karajan, the life and soul of the music in every key, at every moment of the symphony, the whole orchestra, the entire point of being here, world without end, Amen.

My next example of Small and Pathetic writing was written by a close friend who knows how much I loathe traveling overseas by myself and how often in my 53 visits to America I have missed planes, gone to the wrong airport, misplaced tickets and boarding passes, and left bags on planes. The morning after my husband’s sudden heart surgery in late March I had to fly to the USA again, leaving Adelaide at 7:00 a.m. Chloë was to arrive in Adelaide 3 hours after I had left, to hold the fort while I was gone. It was the most stressful week of my life, and I was wailing or close to wailing most of the time. As I was checking in at the airport at 6:15 a.m., trembling with tiredness and anxiety, I felt a tap on my shoulder, and there was my friend.

"I thought you’d need this," she said, hanging something ‘round my neck. "I want you to wear it on to the plane. And don’t take it off till you’re safely on the United Airlines flight, in Melbourne, going to Los Angeles, OK?" It was a sort of Paddington-Bear-Lost sign:
I howled with laughter and then cried with gratitude. There was even a special pocket at the top for my boarding pass, so I wouldn't lose it, and inside it a photo of Malcolm and me at my friend’s home. Now I ask myself, and you, would my friend have gone to such trouble, would she have written such an apparently Small and Pathetic thing had there not been a reader to read it and react to it? Of course not. She wrote with a particular reader in mind, a reader who needed her writing, a reader who would love her for her writing, a reader who would respond to her writing, a reader who would be the after-dinner mint to her writing, making it all worthwhile.

**Our Christmas carol.** My final example of Small and Pathetic writing occurred last Christmas. My lovely old dad, the real Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge, is 87 and suffering from dementia. I visit him each evening at his meal-time, which means his nursing home has become a second home to me, and indeed to all our family. It’s a magnificent place with a terrific staff for whom I wanted to do something special. In the end I wrote them a thank-you song to the tune of “Oh come all ye faithful.” My two sisters and I sang it at the Christmas party, feeling like dorks I assure you, and my middle sister sobbed, but many of the relatives of the other old people said we’d expressed their feelings exactly. The nursing home is called The Oxford, and we might as well sing this together:

```
Oh, staff at The Oxford,
Joyful and committed!
Oh, staff at The Oxford,
You are divine!
Oh, how we thank you,
For the way you care for us,
And all our dear relations,
And all our dear relations --
You are divine!
```
You are such angels,  
Calm in every crisis!  
You all deserve a massive  
Rise in pay.  
You'll go to heaven  
For your endless kindness  
To all our dear relations,  
To all our dear relations,  
To all our dear relations --  
You are divine!

From kitchens to toilets,  
To cleaning and to feeding,  
You treat our loved ones  
With such tender care.  
You keep their dignity,  
And you keep them happy:  
All our dear relations,  
Our fortunate relations,  
Our much adored relations --  
Thanks to you all!

This kind of writing is never written, I hardly need add, without a real and important audience breathing hope and fear into the writer’s ear. It wouldn’t even be considered -- let alone rewritten, mulled over, fiddled with, or even finished -- if real readers or, in this case, real listeners weren’t going to receive it and react to it one way or another.

In the pieces of Small and Pathetic writing I’ve just explored -- the faxed certificate to Jenny, Chloë’s birthday scribblings, my I-love-you note to Chloë, my friend’s “unaccompanied author” notice, and my song for The Oxford, it’s obvious that the writers knew exactly who our readers were. The audiences were unique, each time. Different each time. Very important each time. Likely to react each time. Exciting each time. Causing fear and hope in the writers of those pieces, each time. Worth writing for each time. After-dinner mints each time, at the end of the writing process.

Apart from instilling hope and fear in the minds of the writers of these pieces, the other fundamental effect of knowing who the audience was and respecting it was to sharpen the writing itself, to tidy it up and make it well dressed, to make it legible and correct, to make it logical and clear, to get the message across without any bumps of confusion, to cut out the unnecessary garbage and to remember to include all the essential information. In other words, having a known and respected audience for the writing meant that the writing was as competent as humanly possible, as correct as need be, and as effective as could be hoped for.

Now isn’t that what we’re after in our writing curriculum?

- To have children writing as competently as possible
- To have them writing as correctly as is required
- To have them writing as effectively as they know how
If these goals can be reached by the simple expedient of a real and exciting reader, where are the real and exciting readers our writers need?

**Implications for Classroom Writing**

In our classrooms, when our children write anything from worksheets to science reports, from personal pieces to stories, from author studies to word lists, are they writing with particular readers or listeners in mind? Are they hugging themselves in anticipation of the reaction from those readers? Are they sweating with fear over whether their writing is good enough? Are they dying with hope that the effect they are aiming for will happen, as planned? Do they care about their readers or listeners and the possible reactions? Do their readers fill them with *some* awe, at least? Do they respect their readers enough to make the effort to achieve the effect they think they are aiming for? In brief, could they care less about their writing? And are they writing well?

No one cares about writing well unless they care about who reads it afterwards. And no one cares who reads what they've written unless those readers to some extent fill the writer with awe. Let me reiterate -- *readers make writing matter.*

**Making writing matter.** But why should writing matter? What’s wrong with writing that *doesn’t* matter? What’s wrong with worksheets? What’s wrong with Venn diagrams and making story maps of fairy tales? What’s wrong with comprehension exercises? What’s wrong with learning the features of different genres? What’s wrong with making graphs of favorite books? What’s wrong with writing different endings to stories? What’s wrong with inventing magic spells and writing them down during extension work on *Possum Magic?* What’s wrong with author studies? What’s wrong with small essays on local history? What’s wrong with assignments on the River Murray and the disaster of salination? What’s wrong with science reports on the digestive system?

What is wrong? *None of the above is real writing.* It’s not real because it’s going nowhere. It’s not real because the children who fill in worksheets, who create story maps, who fill in the blanks in comprehension exercises, who draw graphs of favorite books, who invent different endings to stories, who do author studies, or who write science reports on the River Murray don’t really care much about the *readers* of their writing.

To be frank, they don’t care much because the readers are usually their teachers, you and me -- busy teachers, tired teachers -- who are assessing what’s been written, rather than appreciating it, let alone salivating over it, laughing aloud over its humour or weeping over its sadness, or reading it aloud to their own friends and saying with pride, “This was written by a kid in my class, you know. Grade 5. You wouldn’t credit would you? Wow, I’m so rapt!”

Most children who write in school situations have, alas, no after-dinner mint, no hug yourself anticipation regarding a response from a reader. The tedious writing of tedious assignments has usually been assessed by a grade, or a gold star, or a smiley face, or a pass, or a fail, so students come to their written tasks with little hope that their writing will be read with genuine interest, and even less understanding of the possibility that anyone anywhere could in any way be interested or *delighted* to read what they have written.

This lack of interest in the outcome of writing means that these young writers never reach their potential. They don’t even try. What’s the point? They do just enough to get by. This is true of gifted children, as well as those in the middle range and those who are less able. It’s true that a few children do count gold stars and high marks among their most precious possessions, and do make the effort, but it’s for the suspect reward of high marks rather than to elicit a genuinely interested response.
On the brighter side, there are children who greatly admire and like their teachers. I was such a child. For 5 years at high school I doted on my English teacher, Miss Smith, and wanted to impress her madly with everything I wrote. Students who idolize a particular teacher make every effort to get the teacher’s positive attention, the smile of praise, the warm response in writing at the end of a piece of work, the quiet word of congratulation in the corridor. Students like these write well for the right reason: to impress a particular reader -- their teacher -- whom they hold in some awe, whom they like, whom they respect, whom they want to entertain and please, and whose response they long for.

Sadly, however, if we were to ask most school students directly, “Could you care less about the writing you do at school?” it’s my bet that most would say, “Nuh!” Only the students of enlightened teachers like you, who come to conferences like these, would say, “Yes! We love writing. You should see what we’ve written this year!”

**The essence of a writing curriculum that cares.** Writers know of and have respect for their readers or listeners. In all my examples -- and, indeed, in all the writing in the world that’s written for real reasons -- each writer knows who the readers are and cares about getting a message across as clearly and effectively as possible, whether it’s a research paper on bulimia or Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, a scribbled note left on the kitchen counter for our kids or an application for promotion to deputy principal, the TV Times or the latest bestselling novel. In our own teaching of writing it’s probably a good idea therefore to ensure, *before kids start writing*, that they know who they’re writing for; and that they respect their readers or listeners enough to make an effort to write well, enough to be fearful, enough to be hopeful.

**Writers have free choice of topic.** What will they write for this awesome reader? That largely depends on who the reader is. There’s a real audience in all of these following examples: a song for the class; a comedy script for a concert; a poster advertising the imminent sale of lamingtons [*Editor's note:* For the non-Australians among you, lamingtons are small cakes with chocolate and coconut]; a letter to a grandparent overseas; a twenty-verse Australian ballad written by the class and performed by heart, for parents; a science report on the disappearance of frogs from a local creek to be sent to the state minister for the environment; an invitation for the minister to visit the class; a history of three generations of a child’s family to be presented to the class prior to one of the child’s relations coming to the school to answer some of the big questions about building the Snowy River Scheme, or being a child of the “Stolen Generation,” or growing up in a refugee camp in Malaysia, or being a dentist before electric drills were invented, or delivering ice for coolers before fridges were common; a card for Mother’s Day; a careful assessment of the football finals written for a debate in which the topic is “It is a foregone conclusion, based on current form, that the Adelaide Crows will win the Grand Final in 2000.” Whatever it is, the writer, like all the other writers in the world, will be choosing the topic as often as possible -- within the bare requirements of the curriculum.

**Writers have deadlines.** In all the pieces I shared earlier, and in all writing the world over, the writer has some sort of deadline. It’s often a self-imposed deadline, like my fax to Jenny. Sometimes it’s an external deadline -- like this paper, which had to be written by today at the very latest, or the song for the staff at my dad’s nursing home, which had to be finished for the Christmas party. We writers take the time we need to do the job well, within reason.

In our own teaching of writing it’s probably a good idea therefore to allow some leeway with deadlines. A card for Mother’s Day doesn’t take as long as a three-generation family history, so the child who’s writing a poem for a Mother’s Day card needs to move on quickly to some other writing that’s meaningful, some other writing that’s written for some other awesome audience.

Our aim is to nurture real writers: confident writers; excited writers; competent writers; hopeful writers; fearful writers. Real writers don’t write the same things, at the same time as everyone else,
with the same deadline, for the same audience, so it seems obvious to me that our students shouldn’t 
be writing the same things, at the same time, with the same deadline, for the same audience, either.

Writers choose their own genres. In the pieces I shared earlier, the purpose of the piece dictated the 
genre, not the other way round. I didn’t say to myself, “A thank-you letter is my only genre option 
for saying thank you to the staff at the nursing home, for saying thank you for Jenny’s cheering fax.” 
The genres I chose -- a song and a certificate -- were the genres that best suited my needs and 
moods at the time. Writers use genres to suit themselves, within reason. It’s true that genres are 
shaped by their audience and purpose -- so, for example, a CV always looks similar to any other CV, 
a family tree always looks similar to any other family tree. The polite manners of writing dictate some 
genres, but not all.

In our own teaching of writing it’s probably a good idea therefore to encourage a much wider use of a 
variety of genres in order to get away from the same boring old “assignment genre,” to get away from 
the hackneyed, lifeless, common genres of story writing and reports. Let’s kick-start the heart of the 
writing curriculum with some of the diverting genres I’ve mentioned already, and the many others 
that exist within the world of the written word.

Writers decide on the length of their writing, according to need and genre . The writing you and I do, 
in the life we happen to live, is its own length. We don’t say to a mother, ”You have to write 200 
words,” when she’s a writing a note to her kids. We write what we write until we’ve finished saying 
what we have to say.

In our own teaching of writing it’s probably a good idea therefore not to dictate a particular 
requirement on length for children’s writing. This may finally stop the writers in our classes from 
saying over and over again, ”How long does it have to be?”

”As long as it takes,” is how we should answer.

Writers take time to draft and redraft. Real writers draft according to the importance of their 
audience. Often teachers say to me, “I can’t get my kids to redraft. Two drafts is the maximum I can 
get from them; more is impossible.” My answer to that is, “Change the audience to one they care 
about.” Why draft for someone you couldn’t care less about? I wouldn’t. I don’t.

In our own teaching of writing it’s probably a good idea therefore not to dictate a particular number of 
drafts or a requirement for time of completion -- within reason, of course. Remember I have 
suggested that writers need to negotiate their own deadlines. It is important for a writer to have a 
deadline; however, we wouldn’t want a poem for a Father’s Day card to take 3 weeks.

Writers need time: time to think, time to rip it all up and start again, time to get it as right as 
possible for the reader, who’s as important as possible.

Writers have friends to consult. I barely write a thing without chatting to someone about it, 
particularly if I’m having difficulty. During the writing of this paper I was in despair one evening when 
by chance my good friend Lyn happened to phone. I landed all my worries on her and she talked me 
through them to a point of such encouragement I couldn’t wait to get back to work.

In our own teaching of writing it’s probably a good idea therefore for kids to be able to share their 
writing in progress with trusted friends in a writing group, or with a trusted teacher. It’s a myth that 
writers write alone. Most don’t. The steadying hand and good advice of an editor, a friend, or a 
colleague is longed for and accepted by most of the writers I know.

Writers know what makes good writing. As a writer it helps, of course, to know what good writing is,
and how to get it down on paper. I won’t expand on the value of reading aloud to children of all ages since I have beaten that drum so often before. Suffice it to say there’s absolutely no better way of learning about the vast possibilities of good writing than by hearing good writing read aloud every day -- every single day, without fail. A John Marsden novel read aloud in daily chapters, long poems like the Pied Pier of Hamelin, short poems, picture books, short stories, Bible stories, Norse myths, Greek legends, Grimm’s fairy tales, the horror tales of Edgar Allan Poe, the hilarious tales of Paul Jennings, and so on.

It helps writers also to know about and to be able to create great leads and endings, astonishing metaphors, original similes, and appropriate alliteration; to know what to cut, and where to paste, and why; to understand that “showing” is better than “telling”; to be able to connect paragraphs; to know how to punctuate and use grammar correctly; to know how to spell; to know why including speech here and there has the effect of lighting up a piece of writing; to understand what “voice” means and to write with voice -- all this and more.

In our own teaching of writing it’s probably a good idea therefore to read aloud a lot; to find out what the elements of good writing are from what we read and to spread the word to the kids in our classes; to teach quickly and often and explicitly the major problem-solving strategies that help writers of all ages to achieve correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation. We should never assume that the teachers before us have taught any child anything about grammar, punctuation, or spelling. It can’t be taught often enough.

Writers live in lively communities. You may recall that all the writing I shared earlier had the element of a real social connection between real social beings within a real community. It was like chatting in written form with members of a family, friends, workmates, and carers at a nursing home. In my community, writing is a perfectly natural way of expressing ideas and emotion and information. It’s an obvious way to communicate. It’s undertaken with a sense of fun and excitement and there’s a lot of hugging of oneself in anticipation of the responses.

In our own teaching of writing it’s probably a good idea therefore -- indeed, the best idea so far! -- to forget completely about the teaching of writing and instead to create a lively community first, within the classroom, and then to connect with the rest of the school, and with the immediate community outside the school, and then also with the wider world. After all, real literacy only happens in a community of one sort or another, when people need to connect for one reason or another. Beyond the school gates writing is always social interaction. It doesn’t happen in a vacuum.

Creating a Community of Writers

In a real community, literacy is used, not learned. And by using it for real reasons, people learn faster how to do it better. Instead of a dead curriculum let’s set our kids alight with major events throughout the year, events that engage their hearts and minds and make them want to write within a community, and write well. In fact, let’s forget about the writing curriculum. If we focus on the creation of a real and lively community for our students to engage in, the writing curriculum will take care of itself. In other words, let’s start writing ourselves -- you and me -- in our own classrooms, for our own students, to resurrect the dead curriculum, to reawaken our dozy lesson plans, to recall the real reasons for writing, to bring life and zest to the class and to ourselves. Let’s start having fun in a real community.

Our own writing as teachers will not only demonstrate different writing possibilities to kids but will of itself build a sense of community. If we wrote, for example, a hilarious rap on the first day of the school year that explained something of ourselves and our families and set out expectations for our
students, we’d create an in-group immediately. The class would bond through laughter right away. And they’d see, perhaps for the first time in their lives, that writing can be lively and useful simultaneously. School would seem OK after all, if the first day began like that.

If we ourselves demonstrate writing for a purpose on as many different crazy occasions as possible, kids will come to see writing as a viable, normal way to behave, to maintain relationships within the class, to take part in the wider world, locally and globally. All writing would become genuine and urgent and meaningful and correct. If we removed the going-nowhere writing that makes kids feel dead even before they pick up their pens and pencils and replaced it with highly meaningful stuff that would set them alight, our own teaching lives would be relit. Every day would have its own freshness and zest. Life would be so good!

This talk was written when the scars from my husband’s heart surgery had not yet healed, which is why it’s called, “Radical Surgery in the Writing Curriculum: Replacing the Meaningless with the Meaningful.” “Meaningless,” it must be clear by now, means writing that’s going nowhere, for no reason, for no reader, for no response. “Meaningful” means writing that happens in real communities for real reasons, that’s read by awesome readers who care about the writers, who cause hope and fear in the hearts of the writers, who respond to the writers, and who become the after-dinner mints in writers’ lives, making the writing worthwhile.

So before another moment is lost, let’s get out the scalpel and slice out the meaningless, make space for the meaningful, and give our writing curriculum new heart, and a real reason to live.

This article is based on an address by Mem Fox, delivered at a conference at the University of Wollongong in June 2000. It is published here by permission of the author.