Writing the Future
Writing the FUTURE
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Boy writes on air the way my old neighbour Gene Crimmins says Mozart played piano, like every word was meant to arrive, parcel packed and shipped from a place beyond his own busy mind. Not on paper and not writing pad or typewriter, but thin air, the invisible stuff, that great act-of-faith stuff that you might not even know existed did it not sometimes bend into wind and blow against your face. Notes, reflections, diary entries, all written on thin air, with his extended right forefinger swishing and slashing, writing letters and sentences into nothingness, as though he has to get it all out of his head but he needs the story to vanish into space as well, forever dipping his finger into his eternal glass well of invisible ink. Words don't go well inside. Always better out than in.


A great advocate for the power of reading and writing, Trent Dalton’s words could be the mantra for this book: ‘Always better out than in.’

‘Writing … is a way of externalising thought’ writes Dr Kaye Lowe (p. 3), and it has the power to change the way we think. This book explores how the act of writing can have significant, positive consequences for the writer, including the writing teacher and their students who write. PETAA started something in 2018 at our ‘Writing the Future’ Professional Learning Intensive. We started the conversation and challenged the teachers taking part to become writing teachers. To write may not always be, or feel, comfortable, but to achieve this transformational act of communication, to contribute stories to our world of meaning, can change others, yourself and your students.

Our motivational PETAA author and presenter Dr Lowe (For the love of reading, PETAA 2016) explores how the skills acquired through writing can help to prepare students for their future. These skills are the very same 21st century thinking skills that educators are now including in curriculum globally, and they are – and always have been – embedded in the writing process. Writers are creative, critical thinkers who solve problems. Their goal is to communicate effectively with their audience and themselves. The very act of articulating thoughts, and writing them ‘out’, is a social activity and an opportunity for personal growth.

We thank Dr Lowe for embarking on this journey, and we are confident she has provided the motivation for teachers to embrace the opportunity to confidently write the future alongside their writing students.

PETAA, Newtown 2019
It takes a writing community to produce a book, and for this reason I am forever indebted to my extraordinary community for walking the walk with me. Thank you to Peter Geekie for raising the writing bar. His constructive reading of the developing text was invaluable. To my collaborative and critical friends – Maree Williams, Jan Herold, Mitchell Parker, Peter O’Rourke and Brian Cambourne – thank you.

To the teachers from Boys Read (Brisbane), Holy Spirit Catholic Primary School and Early Learning Centre (Nicholls), Plunkett Street Public School (Woolloomooloo), St Joseph’s Primary School (O’Connor) and St Thomas the Apostle Catholic Primary School (Kambah) who contributed strategies highlighting connections between the use of ICT and developing writing skills – a big thank you!

To the student writers from Shellharbour Public School, St Patrick’s Parish School (Cooma), St Bernard’s Primary School (Batemans Bay), St Joseph’s Primary School (Grenfell), St Bede’s Primary School (Braidwood) and St John Vianney’s Primary School (Waramanga), thank you all – you are the present and future of writing.

To authors Susanne Gervay, Morris Gleitzman, Oliver Phommavanh, Alice Pung and Kirli Saunders, I appreciate the difference you make to the lives of young writers, and I appreciate your generosity in contributing to this book.

Wendy Rapee (PETAA) and Nicky Shortridge (editor), you put the icing on my writing cake. I appreciate all you did to bring this book to fruition. My ‘conscious quest’ is to be an advocate for budding writers of the future and, in doing so, serve the teachers from whom they learn.
Dedication

This book is for Ethan and his friends – the future of writing.

...
PART 1

Writing and the 21st century
For a long time, shorthand for how we prepare young people for the digital world was teaching them to code computers. Now we understand that the machines themselves will code. While some people will need to create and invent code, everyone will need to engage with the technology … Critical thinking, creative thinking, computational thinking, ethical reasoning – they all become increasingly important if we are to engage with what the machines can do and the impact they can have on our lives through the choices they are programmed to deliver.

Mark Scott AO
Secretary of the NSW Department of Education
LOOKING BACK TO MOVE FORWARD

Today’s world is primarily organised top to bottom and left to right. We manage and govern, write and present text that way. Tomorrow’s world is organised around nonlinear connections. It is multidimensional and multimodal: automation, robotics and artificial intelligence are currently changing workplaces and lives.

What does this mean for future generations as they navigate complex and changing landscapes? What does it mean for the knowledge we need and how it is shared? What does it mean for how we think and make sense of our lives? Questions such these have major implications for what we teach, how we teach it across all key learning areas and, in particular, how we teach writers.

With standardised testing, public disclosure of test results, and teacher accountability at the forefront of politicians’ minds and high on literacy agendas today, the teaching of writing has been directed at achieving specifiable outcomes, rather than taught as a process or an experience. In the last 50 years, politicians have used parental concern about literacy standards to win votes. Children are tested and the results published so that ‘consumers’ (parents) can make choices on the basis of school performance. Teachers are left feeling anxious and judged. They feel pressured to teach to the test.

The products of this sort of instruction are convergent and conformist. And this in an age when creativity and divergent thinking are of central importance to schools, as they prepare children for tomorrow’s world. In the long run the excellence of education depends on the excellence of teachers who are confident enough and brave enough to innovate and experiment. Indeed, they should reflect the learners they are creating.

What education in the 21st century requires is writing instruction that focuses not on teaching children how to complete standardised texts, but on teaching them to be writers: writers who love words, read like writers and feel a compelling desire to have their voices heard. A focus on improving outcomes and mastering technical skills and processes matters little if students don’t, won’t or can’t write.

I recall Sara, a Year 5 student with whom I conferenced. She started by reading a sophisticated rap about bullying. I thought, what an appropriate text type for her selected topic. She then sang the next page and a half. She connected the rap to a song about hope. I was in awe and had little to say except, ‘Keep on writing. I want you to edit it, type it up and send it to Lady Gaga (if you like Lady Gaga; if not, Pink). She started writing at your age.’

I was humbled by Sara’s talent. She is not the only student who has humbled me. What a privilege it is to be in the vicinity of such powerful writers who are confident to write what is important to them, in a format that best represents the message they need to convey, whether that be imaginative, informative or persuasive. Writers first need to write and, simply put, good writing is good writing.

Writing is changing

Researchers agree that while writing does have a future, it won’t be the same in the future as it is today. Writing, in particular, is a way of externalising thought and for that reason will continue to be important. Novels, poetry, science reports and plays to scripts, essays, magazines and news reports will not go away any time soon. Students of today will continue to need foundational literacies – that’s reading, writing, listening, speaking and viewing. As is evident in the frameworks for learning described below (see ‘Frameworks for learning in the 21st century’ on page 16), literacy will remain a high priority. However, the nature of reading and writing will continue to evolve.

The audience has changed, as have the tools, codes and platforms with which we write. We send emails, text, blog and instant message, and participate in global conversations. What we have traditionally
thought of as writing has been interrupted with a mix of sound and images – different semiotic systems have merged for ever-expanding purposes and audiences. Today, according to Brandt (2014), we write more than we have ever done before in history.

Table 1.1 Elements of change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ELEMENT</th>
<th>TRADITIONAL FORMAT</th>
<th>NEW FORMAT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Print</td>
<td>Digital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbols</td>
<td>Letters, numbers, conventions</td>
<td>Digital codes, visuals, 3D realities, virtual realities, emojis, hyperlinks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tools</td>
<td>Pencils, pens, ink, typewriters</td>
<td>Stylus, keyboard, touch screens, voice, navigational systems, mobile phones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surfaces/platforms</td>
<td>Paper</td>
<td>Screens, virtual realities, multiple levels of graphics, interactive boards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storage</td>
<td>Books, filing systems, boxes, folders</td>
<td>Saved, auto save, cloud storage, scanning, electronic files, encrypted and password-protected storage systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editing</td>
<td>Manual, liquid paper, erasers, cut and paste</td>
<td>Technological, track changes, copy and paste, delete</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we all know, it is difficult to keep up with emergent technologies, the latest digital devices, software or apps. Literacy morphs and adapts to provide new ways of interacting with the world around us. Consequently, the habits of writers have changed. Around 20 years ago, we didn’t communicate via instant message and email, or send emojis. Today, writers are called upon to commentate, follow and criticise in many different ways.

Readers too have changed. They take in text differently, from screens, ereaders and devices, and the popularity of such options is on the rise: there were 17% ereader users in the US in 2011, compared with 28% in 2016 (Perrin, 2018).

Our reading habits and expectations have also changed. We have shorter attention spans, skip pages and make quick decisions about whether to read further or abandon the page. When we want to know something, we google it. We learn to cope with many more distractions when emails, reminders and pop-ups appear on the screen and interrupt the flow of reading.

While we think today’s students are tech-savvy multitaskers – global learners who want fast-paced, interactive engagement, while simultaneously using multiple media to get it – there is a new inequity. Not all children have equal access to technology just because they were born in a generation of digital natives. Access is a prime consideration, but that alone will not close the digital divide.

Giving every student an iPad won’t fix the problem. Other factors such as functionality, the location of users and level of support available to them, individual preferences and the purposes for which they use information and communications technology (ICT) all contribute to those with ICT options and those without. For instance, children who develop gaming skills don’t necessarily know how to create text and may not know how to make critical choices when it comes to consuming media. There are inequalities across schools, ranging from those schools that are BYOD (bring your own device), with every child owning their own device, to those schools that are lucky to have six devices shared between three classes.

Just as some students lack experience and access, so do their teachers. This has major implications for
what is taught and how it is taught – especially in the world of writing. Today most writing produced for public consumption is digitally generated.

**Trending**

1. **Purpose of writing is changing**

   Today writers have a lot more flexibility. They can communicate across time zones, make global connections and adapt their writing according to different platforms. They can collaborate in a way and on a scale that has not been possible before. They can ‘spin their own nets’ on a global scale. Often communication is rapid and fluid, and an instant response is expected.

2. **Writing code is changing**

   The alphanumeric code we have adopted uses a mixture of various kinds of signs: letters (signs for sounds), numbers (signs for quantities) and conventions such as full stops, brackets and quotation marks (signs for the rules of the writing game). While writing is primarily linear (top to bottom, left to right), the use of visuals, videos and hypertexts change the face of writing (now connected and networked). The tight integration of words, images and shapes is critical to writing of the future. Visual literacy could become the international auxiliary language, according to Horn (2001).

   Will learning a new code develop new ways of thinking, which will then influence how writing is used? Today, recoding literature into new codes is underway. Coders write interactive games, sophisticated software packages and argumentation maps that allow the reader to read in all kinds of directions – following a structure made up of boxes within boxes, containing supporting information and disputes.

3. **Audience expectations have changed**

   The irony of the information revolution is that consumers neither like nor want long densely written texts on screens. Today’s readers skip and scan. Readers expect writers to filter, absorb and compress stacks of information into small digestible on-screen chunks. Readers find long texts tiresome, and that lengthy texts slow the interactive process and take away screen space better used for animations, videos and graphics. The fact that today’s writers write so people don’t have to read everything they write is a paradox (Horn, 2001).

**Curriculum has changed**

Having lived through the three primary paradigms/approaches/methods of teaching writing in Australia – skills-based, process approach and genre – I can provide a glimpse of how far we have come from an insider’s perspective, as a student of the 1970s and a teacher of the 80s and beyond. These three paradigms of teaching writing are evident to varying degrees in current classrooms. Grainger, Gooch and Lambirth (2005, p.12) attempt to find common ground:

   … it is more than possible to teach in a manner that encourages flexibility, judgment, imagination, and simultaneously fosters development of voice and verve. It is not only what we teach that counts, but how we teach it that shapes the abilities and attitudes of young learners.

How we teach is built around a set of beliefs (a mindset) about teaching and learning, and underpins all that happens inside the writing classroom.
As a student of the 70s: skills-based approach to writing

Before the 1970s, English was taught as a set of discrete skills consisting of grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling (usually a set list of words, with dictation on Friday), composition and handwriting practice. *The School Magazine* arrived monthly, and in between times we read SRA cards, some graded readers and stencils that smelled like methylated spirits.

Teachers often had a set daily routine, broken into small blocks of time for the teaching of English skills. They stood at the front of classrooms with work prepared on the chalkboard or a commercially produced chart. They pointed with a stick (sometimes the dreaded cane). The stick was to keep everyone on task despite the lack of interest (watching Karl Green try to catch a fly and put it in the inkwell was always more interesting; not for the fly obviously). On other occasions, we would be directed to work quietly in a workbook. Parts of speech, for example, and adjectives, adverbs or spelling rules (i before e) would be drilled, and followed by practise in commercially produced workbooks or stenciled sheets run off on the gestetner.

Writing compositions was a Friday thing. It did not happen regularly (mainly because of sporting events that involved travelling by bus to nearby schools). Writing compositions meant reporting on events or experiences or people (only one, there was never a choice; always a teacher-assigned title). These one-off, arbitrary titles included the school excursion to parliament house, what we did on the weekend, or ‘my best friend’. There were no allowances or special considerations given to those who did not go on the excursion, or hated their weekend, or did not have a friend to write about.

Producing a work of fiction was not called for (nor encouraged) and using imagination was unacceptable. With neatly drawn margins, illustrated using coloured pencils (your own Faber-Castell collection of 24 colours if your parents could afford them; the thick red, blue, green and yellow school-assigned pencils if not), students wrote in response to the title using flowery, insipid prose. The brown paper-covered books were handed in to be scrutinised and corrected by the teacher. Red pen was the usual response and sometimes there was a mark out of 10, a gold or silver star (if you were really lucky, two out of the three, but definitely not two stars.)

On the odd occasion, writing was set for homework. My favourite Year 6 teacher, Miss Duckworth, set the task of writing a poem. As a ‘please the teacher’ kind of student, I recall the angst of not knowing how to write a poem. At the time, I knew two poems: ‘My country’ by Dorothea Mackellar and ‘The circus’ by C. J. Dennis, and they were of little help. As I saw it, my only option was to scour my grandmother’s bookshelves hoping to find an obscure poem to claim as my own. It didn’t work.

As a teacher of the 80s: process writing

In the 1980s, the predictability of textbook driven, top-down, prescriptive, skills-based teaching was interrupted by the emergence of process writing. The whole language movement – in particular the work of renowned researchers Donald Graves and Donald Murray – infiltrated classrooms and the curriculum. Literacy skills and learning were embedded in authentic literacy events that had relevance and meaning for the learner.

Students wrote daily about topics of their choosing. Integration not only of reading, writing, listening and speaking, but integration across key learning areas tied to thematic units was the modus operandi. Acknowledging the unique nature of the child was central to the curriculum. As such, self-expression, student voice, independence, identity, collaboration and creativity were central to this pedagogy. Connecting reading, writing and talking was seen as significant.

Writing was taught as a recursive process rather than a set of discrete skills; brainstorming, drafting, peer conferencing, teacher conferencing, revising, editing, proofreading and publishing were the order of the
The process approach acknowledged that ‘real writers’ do not follow a prescribed series of steps in a linear manner. Matters of correctness (grammar, punctuation and spelling) and style were generally dealt with in the final stages of editing, revising and publishing. Spelling often consisted of a list of self-selected words that were relevant to the student’s writing.

There was a lot of variation in how process writing was conceived and taken up. In hindsight, I recognise the dilemma for teachers grappling with teaching something that conflicted with their experience of learning to write in school. As well, there was little professional development to support teachers adapting to the new ways; and furthermore, this approach highlighted that most teachers were not writers. The approach was misinterpreted and criticised by some as being too ‘modish’.

As a teacher of the 80s: genre approach

Just when teachers had settled into their versions of process writing, the word ‘genre’ was bandied about in staffrooms and became the focus of curriculum discussions and staff professional development. To this point, teachers spoke generally about students writing stories, not genres. Genre theorists, while endorsing the basic changes that had occurred in writing pedagogy as a result of the process movement, raised concerns around the quality and limited range of genres students produced in classrooms. Students tended to produce a narrow range of writing and, according to Martin (2009), the range was limited to personal recounts and observation/comment texts.

Genre theorists believed that the span of writing had to be inclusive of and meet the needs of social practices in which we engage: explaining, describing, arguing, reviewing, recounting and storytelling. The belief was that each genre followed a fairly predictable pattern as it moved towards achieving its purpose. The pattern could be broken down into typical stages. Students, familiar with the stages, would independently apply this knowledge to their writing and write a procedure, an argument and so on. A broader range of genres has evolved over the years to include stories, text response, arguments, factual stories, explanations, information reports and procedures (Derewianka, 2015).

With the introduction of genres, publishing houses responded with genre wallcharts outlining the stages, genre big books with instructions on how to unpack the genre written down the side of the page, sets of small genre-based books, and lots of workbooks, textbooks and blackline masters all focused on teaching genres. There was always an accompanying teacher’s guide. At the time, blackline masters were prolific as children filled in boxes with labels such as complication, orientation and so on. Teachers concentrated on teaching specific genres through a process of deconstruction, joint construction and independent construction. Children replicated the models according to the stages that were demonstrated. Many schools set out specific scope and sequences to supposedly ‘guarantee’ that the range of genres was covered and replication was avoided.

Students have changed

What I find interesting is that despite the independence of ICT users, students in general still desire human connection. Wagner (2014, p. 257) highlights this:

Today’s youth are differently motivated when we compare them to previous generations. Having grown up tethered to the net, young people today are curious multitaskers who hunger for immediate gratification and connectedness. They are creative and want to make a difference … Despite their independence, research suggests that they still crave for human interaction and a sense of belonging. They need and value mentoring and coaching from older adults.

Students have changed incrementally from those of the past. Tethered to the net is what they are now.
No previous generation has been so tethered. Studies show that economic status is not a factor in ownership of mobile phones. Wagner (2014, p. 171) claims that:

87% of teens are online, an average of five days a week two to three hours a day … 67% of teens and 40% of preteens own a mobile phone; spending an average of an hour a day talking. 66% of tweens and teens send text messages daily.

Oblinger and Oblinger (2005) state that it’s not just teenagers who are wired up and tuned in, it’s babies in nappies as well. While (Tibbs, 2010):

... among 4-to-6-year-olds, 27 percent spend over an hour a day (1:04) at the keyboard. While earlier generations were introduced to information through print, this generation takes a digital path.

It is not only their involvement with the net that makes today’s students different. They see life through different lenses from those of teachers assigned to classrooms. Studies across generations highlight significant differences in the likes, dislikes and attributes of each generation, starting with the traditionalists through to gen Z. It stands to reason that within each generation there is a shared collective experience because of their ages. While it is impossible to stereotype a whole generation, research shows that the collective experience gives rise to shared beliefs and values. A summary of the characteristics of each generation is set out in table 1.2, adapted from Prensky (2001); Sukiennik, Bendat and Raufman (2010); Center for Generational Kinetics, or CGK (2018); and Scott (2016). This information is important when considering the diversity in thinking and values that exist between teachers and learners.

Table 1.2 Generation differences chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birth dates</th>
<th>TRADITIONALISTS</th>
<th>BABY BOOMERS</th>
<th>GENERATION X</th>
<th>NET GENERATION</th>
<th>GEN Z</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Description   | • Greatest generation  
• Education for certain people (‘smart’ or ‘rich’)  
• Traditional family | • Now generation  
• Digital immigrants | • Latchkey generation | • Gen Y  
• Millennials  
• Me Generation  
• Digital natives | • iGen  
• Snapchat generation |
| Attributes    | • Command and control  
• Self-sacrifice | • Optimistic  
• Workaholic  
• Get a good job – set for life | • Independent  
• Skeptical  
• Self-reliant  
• Informal | • Hopeful  
• Determined  
• Value flexibility  
• Anything is possible | • Technology trendsetters  
• Realistic  
• Throwback (to baby boomers)  
• Entrepreneurial  
• Pragmatic  
• Fiscally conservative |
PART 1 WRITING AND THE 21ST CENTURY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TRADITIONALISTS</th>
<th>BABY BOOMERS</th>
<th>GENERATION X</th>
<th>NET GENERATION</th>
<th>GEN Z</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Likes</td>
<td>• Respect for authority • Family • Community • Discipline • Security • Hierarchy</td>
<td>• Responsibility • Work ethic • Can-do attitude • Women's liberation • Achievement</td>
<td>• Freedom • Multitasking • Work–life balance • Being rewarded on merit alone</td>
<td>• Public activism • Latest technology • Parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dislikes</td>
<td>• Waste • Technology</td>
<td>• Laziness</td>
<td>• Red-tape • Hype</td>
<td>• Anything slow • Negativity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So what are the characteristics of today’s ‘media crazed’ generation that stand them apart from other generations? They are participatory and experiential learners. They value being entrepreneurial and would rather construct their own learning, make individual choices, assemble information, and access a variety of sources at the expense of being told what to do and how to do it. They do not like being separated from their mobile phones for more than 30 minutes. Today’s students have a preference for experiential learning, which means they like doing things, not just thinking or talking about things. They are independent thinkers who want to be taken seriously. Other characteristics are described below.

They value human interaction

Students long for a constant connection with others, not just with the information and games that the internet provides. They are growing up with an astounding number of tools for communication with friends and have access to a world of new ones – 95% of gen Z has a smartphone and over half of gen Z use their smartphones for five or more hours a day (CGK, 2018; Scott, 2018).

In the classroom, research carried out by Kvaivik (2005) in the US indicates that while most students prefer a moderate amount of ICT, they want face-to-face interaction. Year after year, participants ranked face-to-face interactions as their first or second preference when it came to how they learned. Similarly, findings from studies of distance education (as a mode of learning) showed that students feel something important is missing in their learning experience (Dede, 2005).

Today’s students prefer to learn and work in teams. Manuel (2002) points out that the net generation finds their peers more credible than teachers when it comes to determining what is worthy of their attention. This outlook is illustrated by the fact that 46% of gen Z currently follows more than 10 influencers on social media, and 68% of gen Z reads three or more reviews before buying something for the first time with their own money (CGK, 2018; Scott, 2016). Young (2003) found that students are community minded, and when given a choice prefer to work on things that matter, such as addressing an environmental concern or a community problem.

Siemens (2002) notes that learner–learner interactions in e-learning involve interactions with others over a four-stage continuum, but he points out that interactions are generally limited to communication and collaboration most of the time. Seiman’s continuum of involvement provides a useful framework for thinking about ways to support learners through progressively more complex interaction skills in an effective working group.
Today's students are fast-paced multitaskers

Gen Z are more visually literate than previous generations and many prefer to express themselves using images. They weave together images, text and sound. Literacy is not at the text level but inclusive of all that accompanies it: hypertexts, visuals, videos. They move between the real and the virtual world simultaneously and seamlessly. Because of the availability of visual media, their text literacy may be less well developed than previous cohorts (Frand, 2000).

Researchers report that today’s students refuse to read large amounts of text, whether it involves a long reading assignment or lengthy instructions. In a study that altered instructions from a text-based, step-by-step approach to one that used a graphic layout, more students completed the task and post-test scores increased. ‘From all accounts, they do not want to be weighed down by long convoluted texts that could simply be produced as a visual or with accompanying graphics to be more effective and time efficient’ (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005).

Prensky (2001) states that gen Z exudes the following characteristics:

- They expect to receive information really fast. They ‘parallel process’ and ‘multitask’. They have little patience for lectures, step-by-step logic and ‘tell-test’ instruction.
- Because of the time spent playing video games, they become ‘programed’ to focus carefully and adjust to the speed and interactivity of the game.
- Subsequently, they have short attention spans for traditional ways of learning. They crave interactivity and immediate responses.
- They learn successfully while watching TV or listening to music, because they are used to it.

Today’s students operate in a visual world

Manuel (2002) explains that students are now more comfortable in image-rich environments than with text. They deal with information differently when compared with previous generations. A linear thought process is much less common than bricolage, or the ability to piece information together from multiple sources (Kresh, 2007). Differences (Prensky, 2001) include:

- Ability to read visual images (intuitive visual communicators)
- Visual-spatial skills (gaming contributes to their ability to integrate the virtual and physical)
- Inductive discovery (learn best through discovery than by being told)
• Attentional deployment (multitask and shift attention rapidly, or ignore what is of no interest)
• Fast response time (respond quickly and expect rapid responses).

Writing changes how we think

Long before the skills of the 21st century were considered, Ong (1982, p. 78) asserted that writing has the incredible power to change the way we think, and shape and reshape our views:

… those of us who are ‘functionally literate’ are beings whose thought processes do not grow out of simply natural powers but out of these powers as structured, directly or indirectly, by the technology of writing. Without writing, the literate mind would not and could not think as it does, not only when engaged in writing but normally even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form. More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness. (My emphasis)

Today, writing is much more than the application of a linear alphanumeric code on a surface. Students are required to be multimodal designers of texts, which calls for them to be creative, critical and technologically savvy. Digital technology is basically visual and what has been written in the past is already being effectively re-coded into film, multilayered graphics, simulations, 3D complex images and other forms that could not have been written until new codes were invented. Today writing is easier to produce, transmit, receive and store.

To thrive in a global knowledge economy, researchers contend that students must ‘think critically, solve problems, work in teams, lead by influence, be agile and adaptable, take initiative and be entrepreneurial, communicate clearly and concisely, access and analyse information effectively, and be curious and imaginative’ (Wagner, 2014). Writing goes a long way towards addressing these needs if we think of it as Ong does, as a means of transforming consciousness. We are in the digital age and children have to think digitally if they are to succeed and thrive. This means that our teaching has to focus on the skills they require – primarily creative, critical thinking, communication, social and personal skills (21st century skills). The purpose of this book is to put these skills at the forefront of teaching and learning, with writing being a logical key to developing them in authentic and meaningful ways. It also means that teachers need to be writers, as well as confident and competent digital thinkers and citizens.

Our students have changed, what we call writing has changed, and how we write has changed! These extraordinary times call for an extraordinary effort to move our teaching of writing into the 21st century. To do so we will have to rally our troops and revolutionise the teaching of writing. It stands to reason the only thing left to change is what’s going on in classrooms, if it is not aligned with skills of the 21st century. Together we can do it.
SKILLS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

The demands on learners and education systems are evolving exponentially, but education systems and the curricula that guide them are stubbornly resistant to change. This cannot continue. While the past has been dominated by curricula focused on imparting knowledge, future trends demand that students are equipped to navigate uncharted landscapes where challenges, unpredictability and ambiguity are the only certainties.

Teaching content that is remembered today and irrelevant tomorrow is not the way forward. We cannot ignore the fact that we are living in a digital age, and that this is having a dramatic impact on what our schools need to teach. This doesn’t mean everything must change. Fadel, Bialik and Trilling (2015, p. 1) stress that state-of-the-art knowledge in a discipline and the skills of ‘learning to learn’ will remain crucial, but they also point out that ‘... the dilemma for educators is that the skills that are easiest to teach and easiest to test, are also the skills that are easiest to digitize, automate, and outsource’.

Fadel et al refer to the phenomenon of ‘historical inertia’, which has simultaneously produced overcrowded curricula and a disincentive to introduce new subjects attuned to the needs of modern students. The table below illustrates their point. It shows how the subjects taught in schools since ancient Greek and Roman times have not changed substantially. Core subjects have remained relatively consistent. At the same time, few subjects have been added (for example, higher level mathematics and sciences) and even fewer subjects made redundant (oratory and rhetoric).

Figure 1.1 School subjects over time

Source: Center for Curriculum Redesign (CCR), Boston. Reproduced with permission.
Power, politics and the curriculum

While it is true that there have been relatively few changes in the core subjects taught in schools over the centuries, the changes that have occurred are illuminating. Latin and Greek, for example, were core components of the curriculum in the past for two reasons. First, it was Latin, not indigenous languages, that were spoken by the learned and powerful. It marked the difference between those who were destined to enter high-status professions and those who were not.

Second, mastery of Latin and Greek gave access to the philosophy, literature and history of the Classical world. Knowing these languages allowed students to read content that was unavailable to the less privileged. Vital content (knowledge) is still often inaccessible to many children because the linguistic and cultural resources they bring to school do not match the demands of the texts they encounter. This is especially true in the subjects added to school curricula in recent times: those concerned with higher levels of maths and science. Like studies of Latin and Greek in the past, mastery of the content of these subjects can provide access to wealth and power. It is crucial to recognise that what is included in the curriculum and what students choose to study has a bearing not just on the education they receive, but with politics and power. Which subjects are included is important, but perhaps more important is what is done to make the content of all subjects accessible to every student.

Studies of oratory and rhetoric are also among the subjects that have disappeared from modern curricula. Like Greek and Latin, these subjects also provided access to power and status. A mastery of these skills prepared students (mostly boys) for public life. It meant that they were equipped to deal with the language and processes of governance: of persuasion and the exercise of power.

Changes to education will not alter this, but those who educate the less privileged need to realise that learning to communicate, in all forms and across a variety of settings, must not be an optional extra if all children are to realise their potential and cope adequately with the social and vocational demands of the 21st century. We need to recognise that there is still no level playing field in our education system. The dawn of the digital age has not made education more democratic. A digital divide exists. Access to technology is not the same for all children.

It is vital then for educators to overcome the historical inertia that limits the development of curricula. We need to introduce subjects genuinely attuned to the needs of 21st century students. We need to ensure that these subjects do not serve primarily to provide access to wealth and power. They should not just be about individuality and competition. But stating what they should not be about is insufficient. We need to think carefully and conscientiously about the skills students will need to function effectively in contemporary and future worlds.

Assumptions about writing

Before delving into big questions pertaining to writing in the 21st century, it is essential to hone in on the assumptions and beliefs we currently hold about writing. The skills we need to thrive in the 21st century provide the context for exploring writing further in terms of creative, critical thinking, communication, social and personal skills. Let’s start with the assumptions.

Assumption 1: language helps us make sense of an ever-changing world

Language is involved in the sense-making process from early in children’s lives. The words children learn provide the categories that shape their reality. As they learn to speak, children are not just learning words or mastering a grammar. They are acquiring a culture. Language provides labels for what is experienced. It establishes distinctions and resolves ambiguity. In our
society in the 21st century, the words children learn will include those that refer to the digital world, and will introduce them to the distinctions and subtleties those words define. To function effectively in our new world, children will need to know those words and recognise those distinctions. Knowing how to use them in solving problems and achieving goals will become vital.

The reality is, however, that each family will involve their children in problem-solving in different ways and at differing levels of complexity. Families, especially those whose members are skilled in the use of digital technologies, will offer collaborative experiences different in complexity and challenge from those offered in families where such technologies are only used in routine ways.

Assumption 2: writing changes the way we think

It has long been acknowledged that learning to read and write has cognitive consequences. Renowned writer and professor E.L. Doctorow (Plimpton, 1988) describes writing as ‘a socially acceptable form of schizophrenia’, and suggests that writers give over control as they drop into and take on other personas.

Gee (2003) is yet another who is adamant that the act of writing requires taking on new identities, and that it is during this process that writers build bridges between their old identities and their new ones. He cites the example of a student in a science classroom engaged in real inquiry (as opposed to the passive learning of content). He states that to succeed, the learner/writer must assume the identity of a scientific thinker, problem-solver and doer.

Assumption 3: writing helps us make sense of an ever-changing world

Although both spoken and written language involve the categorisation of experience, and the manipulation of ideas that helps us structure and make sense of our realities, written language has an especially important role to play in this process. Writing something down externalises language and makes it available for scrutiny. This facilitates revision and editing, and these processes help in structuring and understanding our experience of the world.

Assumption 4: writing affects how children think, create, problem-solve and interact

Written language invites conscious consideration of what we think. It differs from spoken language in the fact that it is available for re-examination and thoughtful alteration. Editing involves a conscious reconsideration of what has been written and this process is a powerful instrument for the evolution of human thought. As we re-examine a text and recast what has been said, our reflections on what we have written lead to a realisation that there are both multiple answers to any problem and multiple ways of arriving at those answers.

This is the essence of both flexible problem-solving and creative thinking. And because the written word permits communication not just with people who are immediately present, but those who are separated from us by distance and even time, our problem-solving can be more truly collaborative and global.

These four assumptions remain consistent across print-based and digital worlds. However, the emphasis of teaching and learning must shift from content-based curriculum and teacher-dominated pedagogy to finding ways of supporting students to acquire and embrace the critical skills they need in their daily lives and workplaces of the 21st century.
21st century skills

Preparing students for work, citizenship and life is a daunting task. Despite increasing demands on them, principals and teachers grapple with the niggle (some say exciting) questions about where to next, and where does it all fit in an already congested curriculum and a finite school day? The simplest and most obvious response is that, since modern children occupy a digital world unlike any that has preceded it, educators have to identify and teach skills appropriate to survival in this new world. Before this can be done, however, we need to be more explicit about what skills are.

Sternberg (1998) defines skills conceptually as a form of developing expertise. This raises a further question: are skills and expertise the same thing? Wood (1996) addressed this distinction almost 40 years ago and what he had to say is still relevant. Skills, he said, are usually thought of in terms of overt behaviour, like hitting an effective backhand in tennis. Expertise, on the other hand, involves both knowledge and action as two aspects of a single process. It means not just acquiring more knowledge but also knowing how to apply it in new and different ways. It involves both development of concepts and the acquisition of procedures.

Effective writing, for example, includes content, process and the use of multimodal platforms. But the ways in which writing is enacted in the digital age differs from the ways it was used in previous times. We have to ask: what do we need to teach children about writing in an age when ways of producing, storing, retrieving and using knowledge are totally different from the ways knowledge was stored, retrieved, used and produced just a few years ago?

It does not end here. Wood says that the performance of the ‘expert’ is not just faster, smoother and more accurate than that of the novice, it also differs in the structure of the expert’s mental processes: the expert’s ability to remember information that is more pertinent; to attend to what is significant and to ignore what is not. ‘Experts’ monitor their actions and self-correct when that is appropriate, and they solve problems more flexibly and effectively. In other words, the basis for expertise is the interplay between action and the mental processes. Expertise in the modern world will involve new ways of attending, remembering and self-regulating, and if teachers are to support students in their learning, they need to understand the various ways in which these students use ICT to enhance their mental processes during problem-solving and task completion.

Something else that needs to be remembered is the point Lamb, Maire and Doecke (2017) make: that it is useful to think of skills as context-based aspects of expertise. This is particularly the case in school contexts where skills are attached to curriculum areas rather than exist in a generic state or as disconnected fragments. Teaching is more effective when its purpose is clearly stated and its context specific. This does not mean that learning should be concerned with finding single solutions to complex problems. But students respond better when the relevance of what they are doing is clear and the real-world applicability of solutions (which may be various) is evident.

Finally, the answer to the question of what is to be taught also has to take into account dimensions of learning like character qualities and metalearning strategies. The Foundation for Young Australians (FYA, 2017, p. 9) ventures that ‘as technology reduces the need for workers to complete routine, manual tasks, they will spend more time focusing on people, solving more strategic problems and thinking creatively’. Fadel et al (2015, p.18) offer a similar sentiment: ‘... education for employment needs to refocus away from routinised, impersonal tasks, and towards more complex, personal, creative tasks that only humans can do well’. This means that, when deciding what 21st century students need to learn, we cannot ignore the importance of developing qualities like creativity, curiosity, collaborative learning, social responsibility and resilience.
Frameworks for learning in the 21st century

Many attempts have been made to provide frameworks for thinking about what should be taught in 21st century schools. It has already been pointed out that most researchers agree traditional learning outcomes associated with the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills, as well as mastery of subject-specific content, will continue to be important. But most also agree with the statement from the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 5) that students will require additional skills:

> Literacy and numeracy and knowledge of key disciplines remain the cornerstone of schooling for young Australians. Schooling should also support the development of skills in areas such as social interaction, cross-disciplinary thinking and the use of digital media, which are essential in all 21st century occupations. As well as knowledge and skills, a school’s legacy to young people should include national values of democracy, equity and justice, and personal values and attributes such as honesty, resilience and respect for others.

The Delors report (1996) produced by the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century, developed one of the first frameworks to identify the competencies required for the 21st century. The report proposed an integrated, humanistic vision of education that aspires to enhance the dignity, capacity and welfare of the students in relation to others and nature. Concerns for sustainable human and social development are raised. Core ethical values such as respect for life, human dignity, equal rights, social justice, and a collective responsibility and commitment to solidarity are also pertinent. The Delors report was closely associated with the moral and intellectual principles of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and consequently suggestions tend to be more humanistic than other education reform studies of the time.

The learning framework put forward endorses an integrated vision of education, encapsulated in ‘learning occurs throughout life’, built around Four Pillars of Education:

- Learning to Know
- Learning to Do
- Learning to Be
- Learning to Live Together.

The Delors framework remains relevant today and has influenced the way in which more recent frameworks for learning have been conceptualised.
After Delors

While there is no prescribed, universal or unified framework for organising skills for the 21st century, numerous frameworks have evolved since the Delors report. All share a common emphasis on technology. In relation to other skills, the frameworks share more similarities than differences.

In *Future frontiers analytical report: Key skills for the 21st century*, Lamb et al (2017) reviewed numerous research-based frameworks and devised a list of the most prevalent skills. These are briefly described in the table below.

Table 1.3 Summary of research-based frameworks for learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SKILL FOR 21ST CENTURY</th>
<th>DEFINITION</th>
<th>ASSOCIATED TERMS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical thinking</td>
<td>• Judgement or evaluation for analysing claims, arguments and evidence for making inferences • Using deductive and inductive reasoning to solve a problem or make a decision (Lai &amp; Viering, 2012, p. 12)</td>
<td>• Open-mindedness • Inquisitiveness • Desire to seek information • Points of views • Knowledge base</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>• Something recognised as novel or useful in a given social context (Plucker et al, 2004)</td>
<td>• Open-mindedness • Exploration • Passion • Self-direction • Motivation • Initiative • Innovation • Enthusiasm • Spontaneity • Social situatededness • Risk-taking • Motivation • Uncertainty • Problem-solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metacognition</td>
<td>• Process of thinking about thinking (Flavell, 1979)</td>
<td>• Self-regulation • Academic achievement • Sense of agency • Contextuality • Content knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-solving</td>
<td>Components: • Elect strategies • Apply strategies • Monitor strategies (Newell, 1990)</td>
<td>• Cognitive ability • Authentic • Grounded in daily life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration Cooperation</td>
<td>Social skill (Malecki &amp; Elliot, 2002)</td>
<td>Empathy Responsibility Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>• Impetus to engage in purposive behaviour (Ryan &amp; Deci, 2000)</td>
<td>• Extrinsic and intrinsic motivation • Social and contextual influences • Interests and goals</td>
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</table>
### Self-efficacy
- Perceived ability to succeed, sense of agency, belief you are in control of the outcome of the activity
  (Bandura, 1982)
- ‘I can do it’
- ‘It is up to me to succeed’

### Conscientiousness
- Propensity to follow socially prescribed norms for impulse control, to be goal directed, to plan, and to be able to delay gratification
  (Roberts, Jackson, Fayard, Edmonds, & Meints, 2009)
- Self-discipline
- Industriousness
- Impulse control
- Orderliness

### Grit and perseverance
- Commitment and perseverance in learning tasks and activities despite difficulties
  (Farrington et al, 2012)
- Goal setting
- Delayed gratification
- Tenacity
- Perseverance
- Resourcefulness
- Grit
- Confidence
- Adaptability
- Dealing with ambiguity
- Flexibility
- Self-discipline
- Commitment
- Self-control
- Feedback
- Effort
- Diligence

While these skills are presented as discrete entities, Lamb et al (2017) stress that there is a complex relationship between and among them. Difficulties arise when it comes to defining each skill. Different specialisations adopt their own distinct perspectives. They prioritise things differently, making a common and shared definition near impossible. For example, creativity is applicable in economics, cognitive science, psychology and mathematics, but there is no one-size-fits-all definition that captures the nuances of each perspective. To this end, a generally accepted definition is included.

### Examples of learning frameworks

The following five frameworks for learning highlight the similarities and differences in how researchers, educators and policymakers foresee the future needs of students. All appreciate the speculative nature of forward thinking.

#### Framework 1: partnership for 21st century learning (P21)

This framework has received widespread publicity since the inception of P21 in 2002. P21 is a collaborative partnership among education, business, community and government leaders committed to positioning 21st century skills at the centre of K–12 education in the US. Dede (2010) concedes that not only is this framework widely known and adopted, it serves as a blueprint for other frameworks (Voogt & Roblin, 2012).

The P21 framework lists the skills, knowledge and expertise students should master to succeed in work and life as shown in figure 1.2.
Framework 2: seven survival skills for the 21st century

The Change Leadership Group of Harvard University identified the range of skills expected to shape students’ learning and achievement in the future. Wagner, who headed up the group, claims that innovation starts with curiosity, and curiosity starts with questions (after 11 years of service, the Change Leadership Group concluded its operation on 31 December 2010). In research with major business employers who stress that jobs are changing rapidly, flexibility in the workplace was valued ahead of technical skills alone. This research also revealed that the ability to communicate effectively through writing was essential, but employers’ preferences were for workers who wrote clearly and concisely, with energy and passion, rather than being technically accurate and voiceless.

Skills identified as the seven survival skills are:

- Critical thinking and problem-solving
- Collaboration across networks and leading by influence
- Agility and adaptability
- Initiative and entrepreneurship
- Effective oral and written communication
- Access and analyse information
- Curiosity and imagination

Framework 3: Australian Curriculum general capabilities

The broad intention of the curriculum goes beyond the narrow acquisition of knowledge and the development of skills. It is expected that teachers support students in becoming successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens in the 21st century.
The capabilities identified in the curriculum are:

- Literacy
- Numeracy
- ICT capability
- Critical and creative thinking
- Personal and social capability
- Ethical understanding
- Intercultural understanding.

The curriculum makes it clear that the identified capabilities encompass knowledge, skills, behaviours and dispositions that students develop and apply to content knowledge, and should be embedded across subject domains. Furthermore, decisions as to when, how and within what subjects the general capabilities are introduced are school-based. No prescribed content or assessment standards are attached to the general capabilities.

Other countries have similar lists of competencies. While these lists display some diversity in the terminology used, there is growing consensus regarding the types of competencies valued, as demonstrated in the table below.

Table 1.4 Comparison of capabilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NORWAY</th>
<th>SCOTLAND</th>
<th>NEW ZEALAND</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Five basic skills</td>
<td>Four main capacities</td>
<td>Five key competencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Being able to express oneself</td>
<td>• Successful learners</td>
<td>• Use language, symbols and text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Being able to express oneself in writing</td>
<td>• Confident individuals</td>
<td>• Manage self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Being able to use digital tools</td>
<td>• Responsible citizens</td>
<td>• Relate to others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Being able to read</td>
<td>• Effective contributors</td>
<td>• Participate and contribute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Being able to develop numeracy</td>
<td>(Education Policy Outlook: Norway 2013)</td>
<td>• Thinking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


While only loosely fitting the notion of a framework, Howard Gardner (best known for his theories of multiple intelligences) nominates five cognitive abilities that will be in peak demand, and underpin future models of teaching and learning:

- **The disciplinary mind**
  Students master major schools of thought, including science, mathematics and history, and at least one professional craft.

- **The synthesising mind**
  Students integrate ideas from different disciplines into coherent wholes and communicate about the integration to others.

- **The creating mind**
  Students uncover and clarify new problems, questions and phenomena.
• The respectful mind
  Students are aware of and appreciate differences among human beings.

• The ethical mind
  Students fulfil their responsibilities as workers and citizens.

Framework 5: Center for Curriculum Redesign (CCR) Framework
The learning framework proposed in *Four-dimensional education* by Fadel et al (2015), features:

• Knowledge
  What students know and understand.

• Skills
  How they use that knowledge.

• Character
  How they behave and engage in the world.

• Metalearning
  How they reflect on themselves and adapt by continuing to learn and grow towards their goals.

It claims to be innovative in that it does not present another one-size-fits-all list of what individuals should learn, but defines the spaces in which educators, curriculum planners, policymakers and learners establish what should be learned, in their context and for their future.

Figure 1.3 The CCR framework
Developers of the CCR framework claim that in a classroom, the four dimensions of skills, character, knowledge and metalearning are interconnected. They also state that effective learning is dependent upon the blending of all four elements.

In summary

Many other frameworks exist and include variations of the same themes. In Futures of learning 2, for example, UNESCO (2015, p. 1), states: ‘The growing concerns about potential economic and global crises ahead are leading many to question whether today’s learners possess the combination of critical thinking, creativity, and collaborative and communication skills, necessary to tackle the unexpected developments they will face.’ Other essential skills identified by UNESCO include personalisation, collaboration, communication, informal learning, productivity and content creation. UNESCO also lists personal skills, social skills and learning skills as significant.

Carneiro (2007, p. 156) is adamant that new approaches to learning must accommodate the characteristics of today’s students, they must become more inclusive and address 21st century interdisciplinary themes. He goes on to explain that both students and adults alike need academic and applied knowledge, and must be able to ‘connect knowledge and skills, learning and competence, inert and active learning, codified and tacit knowledge, and creative and adaptive learning and transform them into valuable skills.’ Above all, he says, these skills depend on active learning. The overwhelming majority of students today want learning to be active, not passive (MCEETYA, 2008). Wagner (2014, p. 199) agrees:

They want to be challenged to think and to solve problems that do not have easy solutions. They want to know why they are being asked to learn something. They want learning to be an end in itself – rather than a means to the end of boosting test scores or a stepping stone to the next stage of life. They want more opportunities for creativity and self-expression. Finally, they want adults to relate to them on a more equal level.

Historically, we have never had students like the students of today sitting in our classrooms. Many of them are tech-savvy, digital natives who seek information, research it and make sense of the data they collect. Problem-solving, inquiry-based learning, and creative and critical thinking are just some of the skills that stand them in good stead and motivate them to learn. They are an unknown entity – complex, energetic, social activist and global individuals. They want to be challenged and inspired in their learning. They want to belong, collaborate and interact with diverse people. They want to apply what they know about technology to their school learning, and reach the high expectations of those whose opinions they value and those who demonstrate that they care. There are also those who fall outside the tech-savvy, who were born in the time of the digital natives. The skills of the 21st century are crucial (if not more so) for their survival and their ability to thrive in the future that is unfolding.

Finally, while skills can be taught and expertise developed, writers still have to be taught in a way that meets their needs and addresses what is essential for flourishing in the 21st century. This means we have to take into account:

• differences new technologies have made not just to the production of texts, but how those processes have influenced the relationship between knowledge and action
• role of social, creative and moral processes in the act of writing
• connection of what is taught to power and politics.

Only when we understand these relationships can we plan intelligently to develop students’ writing skills and improve their performance as writers.
ICT AND WRITING

We don't just write anymore

This ‘new media age’ (Kress, 2003) is dominated by a rapid influx of digital technologies accompanied by new social and cultural conditions. The world of learning to write, and the platforms for writing, have changed (and continue to change) significantly. Children no longer just write: they blog, vlog, wiki, interact, hyperlink, produce multimodal texts, podcast, remix and mash-up.

The Australian Council for Education Research (ACER) states that it is imperative today’s students use ICT appropriately to access, manage, integrate and evaluate information, develop new understandings and communicate with others in order to participate effectively in society. According to Skaar (2009):

It is true that digital media democratise the possibilities open to the general public of a more varied and comprehensive text production than ever before, both in and outside school. Participating in this text production naturally implies a richer potential for learning.

ICT changes the ways that writers think about writing and how they think about themselves as writers. To participate in social, cultural and political life requires a wide repertoire of communication skills, and a creative and critical approach. A curriculum that simply focuses on print literacy will not suffice (Burnett & Merchant, 2018). In classrooms, children move seamlessly between digital devices and pencil and paper. Burnett and Merchant (2018) see this fluidity as a reflection of their linguistic, social and cultural competencies. A noticeable change is that demands on writers have increased beyond the printed word. Today writers are expected to create and author texts, respond to and critique texts, access information and content from multiple perspectives, and indulge in multiple modalities.

When it comes to communication, the page has been overshadowed by the screen. Kress (2003) describes the move away from alphabetic literacy to a situation or landscape of communication that is multimodal. According to Locke (2015), multimodality is a characteristic of a text or textual event that utilises more than one mode (linguistic, visual, audio, gestural and spatial) in the production of meaning; it is the interweaving of meaning-making systems. Students add images, videos, graphs, drawings and hyperlinks to websites to accompany their posted text, and in doing so make meaning more comprehensible (Herrington & Moran, 2009). They develop textual repertoires to fulfill many and different roles. By definition, Burnett and Merchant (2018) contend that their textual repertoires must also include more traditional forms of representation.

For the time being, print literacies coexist with screen literacies. Some print literacies have disappeared and many continue to be phased out and replaced with digital options. Examples include navigational devices replacing maps and emails replacing ‘snail mail’.

Social context for change

As new technologies for information and communication continually appear, still newer literacies emerge (Leu, 2000; Reinking, 1998). New writing practices continually shape, determine and create new technologies, while new technologies transform current opportunities for how and why we write; the relationship is transactional. As Leu and Coiro (2004, p. 1584) point out:

Literacy, therefore, may be thought of as a moving target, continually changing its meaning depending on what society expects literate individuals to do. As societal expectations for literacy...
No single theoretical perspective explains the full range of changes to literacy brought about by the internet and other technologies.

Leu and Coiro (2004) point out that changes in how literacy and writing are defined and taught must be considered within today’s social and cultural contexts. A social revolution is underway as homes and workplaces engage in the digital world. Demands for new literacies and strategies abound across all aspects of daily lives. With increased access to information comes increased opportunities and greater satisfaction for students to communicate, connect, create and learn. For students to thrive in the 21st century, they need to use ICT to:

- apply problem-solving skills
- identify problems and seek appropriate solutions
- locate useful information relevant to problems
- critically evaluate information, sorting out accurate information from inaccurate information, essential information from less-essential information, and biased information from unbiased information
- synthesise information
- rapidly and clearly communicate solutions to others.

Ways we write and communicate continue to change

A plethora of tools not only shapes how we communicate and what we communicate about, but also changes the audience for whom we write. The boundaries between visual images and the alphabetic system have merged. Burnett and Merchant (2018) introduce the technical word ‘tokens’ to refer to individual elements of text. The word ‘token’ suggests something more than the letters of the writing system. It encapsulates whole words, icons (such as emojis) or larger chunks of text (as in cutting and pasting).

With changing writing practices come unforeseeable problems. For example, judicial systems are forced to wrestle with and define what constitutes a threat in non-conventional written language. Research by McMahon and Kirley (2018) into the use of emojis highlights the challenges faced by lawyers, judges, and lawmakers in countries including New Zealand, France and the US. In the legal context, emojis are regarded as a legitimate form of literacy. McMahon and Kirby explain that the most troubling use of emojis is in their use in interpersonal messages, where it is unclear whether they modify or amplify a prima facie criminal threat.

For example, a New Zealand judge sentenced a man to eight months in jail for stalking his ex-partner after he sent her a Facebook message that read: ‘You’re going to get it’, followed by an airplane emoji. In France, a man was sentenced to six months in prison for threatening his ex-girlfriend through a text message because he included a gun emoji. In the US, defendants were arrested for stalking after attacking their victim. The message they sent to the victim comprised three emojis: a fist, a pointed finger and an ambulance.
Pedagogy, ICT and writing

Research indicates that teachers’ pedagogical beliefs and knowledge are important factors in the quest for technology integration (Neiss, 2008; Otero et al, 2005; Stolle, 2007). Teachers, according to Chandy (2013) need to develop a critical disposition towards technology. They cannot ignore it, but have to investigate and evaluate its application and use in the classroom. A concern raised by Cammack (2003) is that the differences in use and perceptions of value that exist between teachers and students block change in the integration and use of technology in literacy pedagogy. Students are often more knowledgeable in the use of ICT than their teachers (Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003). This has implications for the classroom, and in the future students’ knowledge will be central to curriculum as they collaboratively share and use what they know about technology and literacy to shape classroom literacy practices.

Teachers will be challenged to thoughtfully guide students’ learning within information environments that are richer and more complex than traditional print media, presenting richer and more complex learning opportunities for both themselves and their students.

(Leu & Coiro, 2004)

The report Maximising the impact: The pivotal role of technology in the 21st century (Vockley, 2007) claims that the use of ICT positively motivates both learners and teachers. The study Motivational effect of ICT on pupils (Passey, Rogers, Machell & McHugh, 2004) stresses that the teacher’s approach to the integration of ICT is a critical factor in learning and that student’s motivation in relation to their use of ICT impacts on attitudes and the quality of work produced.

Burnett and Merchant (2018) propose a move away from focused or direct teaching. This, they say, detracts from opportunities for students to draw across their repertoires for learning in ways that make sense to them, and for reasons that matter in the moment. They introduce the idea of playfulness, as defined by DeKoven (2015, p. 145): ‘Playfulness is flexibility, responsiveness, openness, sensitivity, awareness. It connects us to life.’ Playfulness is an attitude or approach in which nothing is taken for granted and where established ways of doing things are challenged. The notion of playfulness is more aligned with what students actually do when engaged with digital technologies surrounded by their friends and peers.

In less teacher-dominated approaches to pedagogy, teachers are required to be more flexible and less focused on imparting content knowledge from a top-down perspective. ‘We follow the children’s lead to see how they are using and making texts with all the multiple resources they find around them, from paper and pencil to tape and popsicle sticks to cameras and digital video’ (Wohlwend & Buchholz, 2014, p. 33). The learning environment encourages risk-taking. Students explore their interests, experiment, problem-solve and collaborate. Writers co-construct meaning through the use of blogs, threaded discussions and interactive chats. Jonassen, Howland, Moore and Marra (2003) make the point that because the world is now much smaller, through our use of ICTs, students must be prepared for the important, collaborative co-construction of new information and the learning that results.

Collaboration

Technology enables collaboration. The pairing of humans and technology is transformational at an individual and sociocultural level (Ihde, 1992). Jenkins (2006, p. 3) states that the use of ICT produces a ‘participatory culture, in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another.’ As a result, the look and feel of classrooms, the role of teachers and what and how students learn, transform. Students in classrooms collaborate on writing, interact through
emails and blogs, write and perform music, make videos and iMovies, and complete joint inquiry projects, to name a few. To this extent, research by Leander and Ehret (2019) introduces the notion of the affective dimension of literacy practices.

The affective domain generally refers to the development of values, ethics, aesthetics and feelings; it combines cognitive skills, behaviour and feelings. Burnett and Merchant (2018) define it more specifically in relation to the digital world as the feelings generated when people and things meet up in the moment; the feelings generated as people and things come into relation or assemble. The affective domain takes into consideration what occurs in the classroom when children gather around a screen, for example – the proximity of their bodies, their verbal and non-verbal interactions.

**Writing and the digital divide**

Mastering a software program or responding to prompts on an app don’t count as writing. Learners need to be thoughtful, thinking decision-makers, not passive participants of programs designed to cover little more than a traditional workbook page. A conglomeration of clipped pieces of data spruced up with imported images and a proliferation of emojis thrown in cannot be considered a product of thought. The fanciest of 3D graphics does not compensate for lifeless writing.

*Most uses of computers in schools signal fail to engage with the complex technological and media-saturated environment in which children are now growing up. For the most part, they are narrowly defined, mechanical and unimaginative. The answer to this problem is not to import ever more fashionable or ‘child-friendly’ devices, or to sugar the pill of learning with a superficial dose of digital entertainment. Digital media literacy represents a more rigorous – but also more enjoyable and motivating – way of addressing the educational challenges of the digital age.*

*(Buckingham, 2007, p. 53)*

Equitable access to technologies and technical support are critical, and directly influence what a teacher and students accomplish. In its Annual Report 2004/5, the Office of Communications (Ofcom) in the UK states that among the barriers to media literacy are several interrelated factors, of which social class and economic status are the most well established. The report adds that less is known about other potential barriers such as disability and ethnicity, or about the role of individual dispositions or motivations. It is important to recognise that such barriers may affect the quality of access as well as the quantity of what can be done. For example, the report lists available functionality of the technology, and the location and level of support for use as other dividing factors.

Merchant (2007) introduces the term ‘digital capital’ – the resources or assets that some children have, or could acquire, to prepare them for the future. Socially advantaged students have far greater access at home than disadvantaged and minority students to learn and master ICT skills (Solomon, 2002; Lebo, 2003; Warschauer, 2003). McKenzie (2000, p. 17) sheds a different light on access:

*… we hear that a nation’s commitment to ICT, in education in particular, will drive economic development, innovation and global connectivity. The facile rationale is also that it will reduce the information divide in the population, when all it may do is reduce the digital divide. It is assumed that the information and digital divides are synonymous and reducible simply by ICT expenditure.*

While access is one thing, literacy research (beginning with the studies of Shirley Brice Heath and Denney Taylor) highlights also the discrepancies between what is valued in homes regarding reading and writing and what is valued in schools. The disconnect won’t just disappear because homes are better equipped with ICT.
There is also a digital divide evident in schools across Australia. In some more affluent schools, all children have their own device and unlimited internet access. In others, classes share a bank of computers and there is limited access to the internet. Teachers’ capacities to use ICT varies significantly.

**Ethical issues**

The use of digital media in everyday life raises critical questions about how we relate to one another and how we relate to the world around us. Fears about internet safety, commercialism, stereotyping and negative images, and the need to make informed choices about digital resources are prime considerations in this day of digital overload. Parents, carers and teachers agonise over the possible ill-effects of screen time on children and of overexposure to media (Squire & Steinkuehler, 2017). Ensuring internet safety is a social and ethical issue confronting systems, politicians and parents. Issues relating to safety, trustworthiness and unwelcome attention concern us all.

Raising students’ awareness of how they position themselves through participation on the internet, and the advantages and disadvantages for themselves and others is a major concern. While writers strive to be discerning and confident users of digital technologies, they have to be mindful of cyber-activism. Whose responsibility is it for writers to be critical consumers of the information they encounter and produce? We all need to step up.

**Technology, writing and teaching**

The following perspectives demonstrate different ways of thinking about the connections between digital technologies and the teaching of writing.

**Critical literacies**

Advocates of critical literacies contend that the power relationships perpetuated through and around texts must be addressed through critical engagement. Educating students to critically consider the practices in which they engage, how they as writers and other writers position themselves and are positioned by others, are important considerations. Burnett and Merchant (2018) distinguish between the ‘small c’ and ‘big C’ of critical literacy. ‘Small c’ they say is related to supporting children to be discerning users of the internet. Whereas ‘big C’ begins with the assumption that everyday life is framed by unequal power relations upheld in part by language, and the texts we use and create.

From a ‘small c’ critical perspective, writers ask:

- Where do I find information?
- Did I find what I was looking for?
- Is this a reliable source?
- How can I check my source of information for accuracy?
- Is there bias? Who is writing this text? Why?
- Why are these images included? What do they add?
- What more do I need to know?

‘Big C’ critical literacy has the writer establish the trustworthiness of information, question whose interests are served, and then the writer/reader is expected to apply interventions to ensure equity. ‘Criticality’ demands that writers be critical, discerning and strategic in what they write, why they write and for whom they write. When critiquing the work of other writers, they are cognisant of the writer’s stance, the writer’s motives, and they question the message. Kellner and Share (2007, p. 65) suggest that
'media is socially-constructed and it is necessary for the consumer to consider the relationships between representation, ideology and power between the producer and the consumer.'

From a ‘big C’ critical perspective, writers ask:

- Whose voices are heard?
- Whose voices are absent?
- Why have these voices been prioritised and/or ignored?
- What does the writer want the reader to think/understand? For whom is that important?
- Are there other options not represented?
- What do I believe? Why do I believe this?
- Has this text changed my beliefs? How and why?
- Does your audience hold the same or similar beliefs? How do you know?

A multiliteracies perspective

The term ‘multiliteracies’ was coined by the New London Group (1996), which argued that there are many literacies (for example, critical, visual, computer and financial literacy). ‘Multiliteracies’ refers to both the social diversity of contemporary forms of literacy, and to the fact that communications media requires new forms of cultural and communicative competence (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). New London Group contends that literacy is not a single entity, but consists of a set of multiliteracies that incorporate different cultural contexts and different communication technologies. Literacy, therefore, is broadened to reflect linguistic and cultural diversity, as well as the multiplicity of communication channels through which people choose to make and transmit meaning.

New London Group presupposes that teachers and writers are aware that different cultures and social groups have different ways of ‘doing’ and valuing literacy. Writers navigate within technological, cultural and linguistically diverse communities. Multiliteracy strategies emphasise how meaning is made of the new and unfamiliar. From a multiliteracy perspective, writers ask:

- What do the meanings refer to? (Representational)
- How do the meanings connect the persons they involve? (Social)
- How are the meanings organised? (Structural)
- How do the meanings fit into the larger world of meaning? (Intertextual)
- Whose interests are the meanings skewed to serve? (Ideological)

A pedagogy of multiliteracies aims to create a writer who is ‘an active designer of meaning, with a sensibility open to differences, change and innovation (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Multiliteracies recognise that meaning-making is an active, transformative process.

A media literacy perspective

Ofcom’s definition of media literacy is ‘the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts’ (2004/5, p. 4). Of the three areas in Ofcom’s definition, creativity is by far the least well researched. Media literacy is multidimensional and the nature and extent of the media literacy that individuals need and develop depends very much on purposes, motivations and preferences. Levels of media literacy across populations is difficult to assess because of these differences.
Buckingham (2003), in *Media education: Literacy, learning and contemporary culture*, states that media education is still largely preoccupied with the power of media texts, when it should be more clearly focused on the work audiences do interpreting them. He argues for media education to take a student-centred perspective, beginning with students’ existing knowledge and experience of media, rather than from the instructional imperatives of the teacher. Buckingham (2003, p. 16) states that educators can no longer see themselves as ‘legislators’, imposing the values and norms of an ‘official culture’; the best they can be is ‘interpreters, making available “multiple realities” and diverse forms of perception and knowledge’.

New teachers, he believes, are active media consumers and are less likely to take a protectionist approach (paternalistic approach) because it does not fit with their own experiences. Buckingham stresses the need for ‘critical analysis’ as a process of dialogue, rather than a matter of arriving at an agreed or predetermined position. He advocates for ‘critical production’ alongside ‘critical consumption’.

In the report *The media literacy of children and young people*, Buckingham et al (2005) state that creative involvement in media production makes an important contribution to the development of critical understanding. The teacher’s role is to develop young peoples’ creativity and their participation in media production: ‘Media educators are enabling their voices to be heard; and in the longer term, they are also providing the basis for more democratic and inclusive forms of media production in the future’ (Buckingham, 2005, p. 14).

Masterman (1985, p. 24) shared similar sentiments more than two decades ago when he said: ‘The acid test of any media education programme is the extent to which [students] are critical in their own use and understanding of the media when the teacher is not there. The primary objective is not simply critical awareness and understanding, it is critical autonomy.’

From a media literacy perspective, writers ask:

- How can I communicate differently using words, images, sounds and video?
- How do the features of a new media writing environment (for example, a blog) dictate the kind of writing that happens there?
- How do we use new media writing to reach targeted audiences?
- How do we decide what will be represented in written prose? Images? Sound?
- What print-centered writing is transferable to digital environments? What can be discarded?
- What is the difference between ‘writing for the page’ vs ‘writing for the screen’?

Lack of research

Successful and sustained work on digital collaboration in school contexts has rarely been documented. (Burnett & Merchant, 2018). Research is required to better understand new skills and strategies needed to effectively use ICT. Far too little research has been conducted in this area for far too long (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003).

For the purposes of research it is also difficult to assess writing using ICT when so much of what students do is collaborative and shared. Questions arise that have not been considered in traditional pedagogies. How do students get assessed for sharing their knowledge and expertise with others? How do teachers grade participation in chat sessions and the value of a contribution to an online discussion? New approaches to what and how assessment is conducted need to be considered in promoting literacy-rich and dynamic classrooms of the future.

Unfortunately, research by Kirkpatrick (2001, p. 46) concludes that ‘despite calls for fundamental
rethinking of pedagogies for the e-Environment, to date our attempts to invent new pedagogies have been limited both by conventional attitudes to teaching and learning, and the wider socioeconomic context. I would strongly suggest these conditions still apply.

**Writing and research**

Writing, like reading, is a complex process: difficult to research, some would say difficult to teach and, most would agree, difficult to master. Dyson and Freeman (2003, p. 974) argue that research on the writing process does not offer any ‘simple prescriptions for practice but it can offer a vocabulary for talking about the nature of writing’. The best we can hope for is to keep the conversation about writing moving forward.

Writing research is inadequate. By comparison, research on the teaching of reading has a much longer and richer history. Reading instruction and its outcomes are granted higher status by policymakers, educators, researchers and the public. Why? Maybe it is easier to attach a quantitative measure to reading than writing for politicians and educators to report on the progress being made. Or maybe writing is regarded as too subjective and elusive, much more difficult to quantify for reporting and accountability purposes. Coincidently, funding for writing research lags significantly behind reading. According to Juzwik et al (2005), writing research historically has been comparably underfunded, mostly descriptive rather than experimental in nature and typically conducted in post-secondary education settings.

**Study of writing is relatively new**

Before 1947, references to writing and writing instruction referred to teaching students to form letters, spell words and produce legible handwriting. Writing was the privilege of the elite. The professional literature does not mention the writing process until Writer’s magic, in which Day (1947) introduces the seven steps of the writing process.

In Writing as process, Mills (1953) examines writing instruction in English as an additional language (EAL) classrooms and points to the inability of educators to recognise writing as a process, something he regarded as a failure. It wasn’t until the 1970s that the process approach was implemented as part of the school curriculum in the US. In her study, The composing practices of twelfth graders, Emig (1971) observed that contrary to popular belief and standard practice, writers do not produce written work in a step-by-step fashion. Elbow (1973), in Writing without teachers, looked at writing instruction from the perspective of professional writers, and viewed the writing process as a series of problem-solving steps that allow writers to discover what they know and feel about a subject. He states that it is counterproductive for writers to know the meaning of what they write before they write it. Early proponents of the process model (including Donald Graves and Donald Murray, mentioned above) emphasised a balance in instruction between the writing process and resultant products.

Researchers concur that as we learn more about what is entailed in teaching and learning the writing process, the definition of writing and the pedagogy associated with the process model will change. The problem though is twofold: one, writing and what it means to be a writer proves to be an elusive topic and difficult to monitor over time (particularly now that the very nature of writing has changed with technology); and two, the various interpretations and definitions of writing pedagogy add further complexity to the issue. What we mean by writing today is even harder to pin down because of its multimodal nature and the arrival of new social, new literacy and new pedagogical practices (Edwards-Groves, 2011).
More than the sum of its parts

The nature of writing and the writing process is multifaceted, complex and broad. Processes are recursive and interlocked. Studying one component at a time makes complex research manageable but fails to capture the reality of the phenomenon in its totality. Research has tended to focus on specific aspects of writing such as prewriting, conferencing, revising, use of mechanics and vocabulary.

Research derived from the results of NAPLAN writing demonstrates the limitations and absurdity of dealing with parts of the whole: the writing component of NAPLAN is an assessment of a draft, overemphasis is placed on the mechanics, and writing to a prompt (that may or may not interest the student, who may know very little about the topic) disadvantages some and favours others. Wyse (2017, p. 222) confronts this issue when he states:

One of the contributions that educational research on writing in the UK has made is … a robust and clear view that holism is essential. For this reason, the repeated decisions by politicians worldwide to base language and literacy policies on ‘back to basics’, and old-fashioned grammar teaching based on their personal ideology rather than evidence, is unforgivable. And the lack of time for speculation, contemplation and incubation in formal education is one of the most troubling features of modern schooling. The power of literacy is a global phenomenon.

Most aspects of the writing process are not quantifiable, and most articles and reports are not research reports. Many raise questions that are not empirically answerable (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2005). To add to the dilemma, writing is a developmental process and there are very few longitudinal studies.

Teachers of writing

While research emphasises that teacher knowledge (Hill, Rowan, & Ball, 2005) and teacher interest (Alexander, 2008) are linked to student achievement, research into teacher competency to teach writing is contentious. Research (Locke, 2015; Graves, 2003; Smith, 1982) indicates that teachers in general have only a rudimentary understanding of the teaching of writing. Teacher preparation courses rarely require a component in the teaching of writing; teacher certification requirements also assure a continuing imbalance between reading and writing.

In an attempt to counteract teachers’ lack of understanding and expertise in reading and writing, Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers are encouraged to include only those students who demonstrate literacy competencies ‘within the top 30 per cent of the population in personal literacy and numeracy’ (Craven et al, 2014, p. xiii). In an attempt to enrol only competent literacy users into teacher education, the Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education (LANTITE) is compulsory in Australia for teaching candidates.

There are few professional learning opportunities that concentrate on teaching writing, both content knowledge (what to teach) and pedagogical expertise (how to teach it). Hoffman and Pearson (2000, p. 28) claim: ‘Yesterday’s standards for teaching and teacher education will not support the kinds of learning that tomorrow’s teachers must nurture among students who will be asked, in the next millennium, to meet literacy demands that our grandparents could not fathom.’
A CALL TO ACTION

Before we can go on to discussing how to teach writers, we need to make a few points about the writing that real writers do. First, writing is:

- an instrument of explanation, persuasion and narration
- a powerful means of communicating ideas, information and feelings
- a process of imposing order on and giving shape to experience.

Writing takes discipline and stamina

Writing is not a straightforward routine. It involves finding the heart and pulse of a text; discovering its essential meaning; deleting paragraphs that are loved, but which have to go because they don’t fit; and much more. Children need to know that often (perhaps even mostly) writing is a struggle and that this is as it should be.

Flusser (1997, p. 37) has written that: ‘The struggle is absorbing, making (the writer) forget himself and everyone else. Writing is an intoxicating enterprise. In fact, those texts written unselﬁconsciously are among the most important we possess’. Sue Whiting (2019), author of Missing, explains the discipline of writing is akin to learning to ﬂex a muscle. Others highlight the need for ‘bum glue’.

Finding what you want to write about takes time

Generally, writers discover what they want to say in the act of writing about it. Getting started is the key. Children need to know that it is alright to start on a piece writing, and then leave it for a while, before going back to it. They need to know that writing about the same topic is also alright (it’s the writing that matters) and that writers often have more than one piece in development at the same time.

Often a piece of writing is put aside for a while before it is reconsidered, revised and published. Not all writing is published. Classrooms have to be organised to make this practice the norm.

Libby Gleeson (1999, p. 82) describes her process of revision:

Rewriting is like the work of the archaeologist. The writer has to work her way down through the layers of the text, first revising the overall, fundamental structure of the work. Then she looks at the interplay of the characters and checks that the relationships she is exploring fulﬁl her intentions. Then she examines other aspects of the content, the imagery and the syntax. And it isn’t necessarily done in the discrete order or with as much discipline and control as I have suggested. Every reread of the text may throw up some example of any one of these kinds of revision. It is a case of going back through the text, over and over again both adding and subtracting.

Writing isn’t a competition

All children need to be encouraged to express their ideas and communicate what is meaningful to them. Writing is a vehicle for doing so. Children love to write and they all are at different points along the writing continuum. When writing is about a grade or a teacher comment, those who are reluctant or resistant have even more reason to give up. Teachers should make sure:

- their expectations are made clear to their students
- feedback is given in terms of those expectations
• feedback is progressive, helping to shape what is written
• feedback is an act of communication designed to move the writer forward.

Writing is meant to be shared

Children need to know that writing is social and communicative. Writers do not write alone. They share and value responses from those in their community.

There are many ways to write a text

Children should be aware that there is more than one way to write a narrative or a report, a persuasive text, or a set of instructions. They should be constantly alert to how writers achieve their purposes in different ways. And they should be observant and experiment, and learn many ways of achieving similar purposes.

Texts don’t just have to be exclusively made up of written language either. Children should experiment with producing multimodal pieces.

Good writing is good writing is good writing

Good writing is not restricted by genre, style or topic.

The writing classroom

An essential ingredient of any successful writing program is that the children should be eager to participate. If formulaic writing rather than writing authentic texts for genuine purposes is the rule, then the best teachers can hope for is careful imitation and assiduous compliance. Eagerness comes when children become genuinely involved; when they understand the purpose of what they are doing and generate excitement out of the fact that what they’re doing touches their lives and is of interest to others.

Children want to write when they have something to say and are not inhibited by ‘correctness’. When they think they have to get it right, they have to spell every word correctly or they have to write a certain way, there is a different atmosphere in the classroom. This is not to say that things like punctuation, spelling and grammar are left untreated. They are addressed in many ways throughout the literacy block, teacher conferencing, through reading, and especially at the point of editing for publication.

In my visits to many writing classrooms, I have witnessed a vast difference between those where the emphasis is on writing outcomes, and those where the emphasis is on writers learning to write. In the latter, writing is an emotional and exhilarating experience for everyone there: pupils and teachers alike. I get goosebumps when teachers describe the writing in their classrooms in words like ‘exhilarating’, ‘unbelievable’, ‘it blows me away’, ‘love every minute of it’. When I observe these rooms, I see engaged, happy writers in ‘the zone’, oblivious to birds flying past the classroom windows and unaware of visitors in their space.

Some writers refer to their zone as an altered state of consciousness. The minute I step through the doorway, I feel this collective zone: the peacefulness, no-one policing to make students write and every student beavering away, lost on the page. The teacher is more difficult to find, usually off to the side quietly conferencing with a writer. The children look like masters of their craft, at one with their instruments of choice: pencil, pen or keyboard. It could just as easily be clay, the bow of a violin or a tennis racket.

One of the key purposes of this book is to discuss how we can create classrooms of writers like this, where eagerness, enthusiasm and creativity are dominant. Where children want to enjoy solving problems, collaborating and communicating.
The courage to write

When I first started conducting parent education programs on helping children with reading at home, I practised with an audience of one. I didn’t think I even had the vocabulary to talk to parents and I was extremely nervous doing it. I held tight to my belief that I could make a difference to the children I taught if their parents knew how to help them with reading. I persevered and now thousands of parents later, the work continues to be extremely rewarding for me.

Teaching writers has to be a rewarding experience for all concerned. Getting there can be difficult if you believe that you can’t write and nor can they. It takes courage and sometimes a change in mindset. It is much easier to stick with formulaic writing and blackline masters, giving responses that focus on spelling, punctuation and grammar. That way you don’t have to be vulnerable. It is also easy to establish a power relationship based on the fact that you know things the children don’t and can point out things they can’t. For those who care about teaching writing, that will never be enough.

If you want to teach writing well, you have to be a writer. You can’t stay in the stands and watch the game. You have to be part of a community of writers. You have to take risks in the same way we ask children to take risks on a daily basis in order to learn. There is no doubt that many teachers are uncomfortable about themselves as writers and I have heard them express their lack of confidence in many ways. Here are some of the things they have said to me.

- ‘How do I bring passion into my teaching of writing when I hate writing?’
- ‘I am not good at it.’
- ‘They can’t write because they haven’t got anything to write about.’
- ‘They’re not good at it.’
- ‘What do you mean, they don’t need prompts? They don’t have anything to write about and nor do I.’
- ‘I have no time to write.’
- ‘Can’t I just focus on reading?’

There is only one solution to these problems. Teachers must have the courage to write.

Ray (1999, p. 7) describes how she became a writer (along with her students) and how she broke through the limitations of a shaky start:

My students and I use our writing to say, ‘this is who I am, this is what I wish for, and this is what I care about’ ... There is satisfaction in this that I had never known from school writing as a student myself, and so as a teacher I found confidence in my ability to rise above what I had known as a student.

It is a satisfaction we should strive to develop in all the children we teach. But it will only happen if, like Ray, we don’t stay in the stands and watch. We have to actively participate in the game and share with our students the joys of writing.
Teachers must be writers: it’s non-negotiable

When I ask individual teachers in our schools if they are a writer, responses are overwhelmingly and mostly unashamedly, ‘No’. They lack confidence in their ability to write and do not identify as writers. And yet they are required to teach writing. No-one should teach something they don’t like and they don’t practice competently.

Distinguished researcher and writing guru Donald Graves was one of those who was adamant that only writers should be allowed to teach writing because, he said, writers alone understand the circumstances of creation. The problem is that our educational histories set us up to believe, value and expect certain things about writing and what it means to be a writer. Our experiences inescapably impact on how we teach writing. Many of us are products of a system that taught us about writing, but failed to teach us to be writers.

Teachers who are writers know first-hand about how writing happens and why. They know the importance of topic choice, real purposes and the role of the audience. They understand the process and know how to eliminate superfluous information, distill ideas into ordered paragraphs, complete the task of rewriting draft after draft and much more. They know what it means to be vulnerable and have their ideas scrutinised by others. They know what it feels like to write powerfully and have a voice that is respected and heard. Forever hopeful, Graves strongly recommended that all teachers become writers – not necessarily published writers, just writers.

Unfortunately, if our experience of writing during our school years (and in undergraduate courses) was substandard, it is likely that we won’t even know where to start. We will just teach writing as we were taught. We will structure our writing time and the way we go about supporting writers in our classrooms in keeping with what we believe. But if those beliefs are false and misinformed beliefs, based on inferior practice, all we will do is pass on our confusion about writing and our distaste for its practice.

Part of the trouble is that writing has always been the runner-up to reading in terms of research, research funding, university course options and professional learning opportunities for teachers. There has been little help for teachers who want to teach writing well. There has been a notable lack of writing courses in our pre-service education training, so teachers have found themselves in the unenviable position of having to learn on the run, to learn from mentors and to learn from the books they read.

This must change. If we are agreed that teachers of writing must be writers themselves, then steps need to be taken to make that happen. Teachers themselves must become communities of learners, writing together, helping each other, sharing their work. Making writing workshops for teachers a regular part of the school routine is one important step in the right direction.

Children want to write

One of the great, unrecognised impediments to teaching writing effectively is the belief that children have to be motivated to write. This is at the basis of teaching that insists that children need to be given topics and prompts before they write. Meek (1988) once remarked that teachers too often claim that a child is not interested in reading when the real problem is that the teacher has not yet discovered what the child is interested in reading. The same thing is true when it comes to writing.

Newkirk and Kittle (2013, p. 40) have commented on this issue. For years, they say:

... we have underestimated the urge to make marks on paper. We have underestimated that urge because of a lack of understanding of the writing process, and what children do in order to control it.
Without realising it we wrest control away from the children and place roadblocks that thwart their intentions. Then we say, ‘They don’t want to write. What is a good way to motivate them?’

So, the real issue to be addressed is not how we can motivate children to write, but instead how we can find out what children want to write about. Writing is a personal and emotional matter. What this means is that teachers have to know not only what to teach, but also who they teach. Teachers and students bring a diverse and complex set of experiences, values and beliefs to every classroom. Flowerday and Schraw (2002) and Ajzen (1985) suggest that beliefs develop a person’s value system and value systems guide behaviours including how we learn, what we learn and how we interact. This means that teaching writers involves knowing your students well and taking the time to find out what they value.

Communities of writers

Writers are vulnerable; giving over trust is fraught with danger. (Even more reason to take the writing of children, and their topics and intentions, seriously.) There is always the possibility when writers lay bare their souls that no-one ‘gets it’; the writer has misjudged the audience, the purpose is unclear or way off track, and stylistically the reader can’t access their meaning because the text is too dense, too light, too boring or just lacklustre. Maybe writers hold back because they fear they will be misinterpreted, exposed as ignorant or put at risk, or somehow they will upset the status quo. Writing infused with a sense of failure becomes stifled, overworked, banal and tedious.

The truth is that children will only write about what is significant in their lives in a climate of mutual support and trust. Creating a community built on trust is vital to the success of learning about writing because, ultimately, when writing is shared with an audience the reader decides whether or not the writing is successful. The text is always open to the reader’s interpretation, filtered through a point of view, diverse interests, unique experiences and (in the best of scenarios) a common knowledge base. Writers put a lot of trust in their readers and many without the realisation that their text has as many meanings as it has readers. Its fate lies in the hand of the reader. Flusser (1997, p. 39) says: ‘Texts are half finished. Their signs rush towards an end point but past this towards a reader, who they hope will complete them.’

Writers use readers or audiences as measures of success or lack of it. It takes discipline, resilience, determination, flexibility, audacity and risk to be a writer. Without these traits, the writer might as well go through the motion of completing blackline masters and remain mute. There is no program or quick fix to produce exemplary writers. Smith (1988) points out that the knowledge needed to write successfully is so vast that it could never be covered or contained by a systematic instructional program. Quite simply, he says, students must learn what they need to know about writing from reading. ‘Teachers must recruit the authors who will become the children’s unwitting collaborators’ (Smith, 1988, p. 26). They are also our collaborators and undeniably, we all need qualified collaborators who have walked the walk.

Where to start? Beliefs

What teachers do in the classroom is governed largely by what they believe, and these beliefs serve to act as a filter through which instructional judgments and decisions are made (Cantu, 2001; Handal & Herrington, 2003; Stipek, Givvin, Salmon, & MacGyvers, 2001; Borg, 2001). The only logical place to start and change process is with beliefs.

Teachers’ beliefs impact greatly on classroom relationships and the contexts for teaching and learning. They permeate all aspects of instructional decision-making, including choice of strategies, level and type of interactions, mode of delivery and the physical arrangement of the classroom environment.
They also play a role in determining levels of respect, tolerance, empathy, degree of social conscience and personal responsibility.

When it comes to the teaching of writing, teachers’ beliefs are revealed in the attention writers receive and the value placed on writing. Value can be measured by the frequency of writing and the purposes for which children write. Value is also evident in the support writers receive, selected teaching methods, regularity of publishing, how and where writing is displayed and shared, the reading that supports it and how it is assessed.

Children observe how we treat writing. They watch in the same way that they watch us handle books, read aloud, or share our love of words. They take notice of how we learn and how we respond to not knowing the answer. They assess what is important through the questions asked and the answers valued. They listen intently to how we ask questions and to whom the questions are directed. They are cognisant of what we value when conferencing with them and when they receive feedback about their writing. They make judgements about writing and themselves as writers because of what we say and how we say it. For the benefit of our writers, we could all be more like Ms Minifred in Baby by Patricia MacLachlan (1999, p. 16):

Ms Minifred liked wondrous words. She loved the beginning of books, and the ends. She loved clauses and adverbials phrases and the description of sunsets and death.

It takes more than the passion and enthusiasm of Ms Minifred to create communities of enthusiastic writers; writers who in unison give a communal moan when writing time is up. We have to be writers who know the curriculum, have a sound understanding of the writing process and know our students well. When teachers trust that their students have something worth saying, and give them daily opportunities to say it, children succeed; on the other hand, when writing is cute and contrived writers don’t say what they think is important, they conform.

Making beliefs explicit

I have said that false or misinformed beliefs are the basis for poor writing instruction. The problem with such sets of beliefs is that they are taken for granted far too often. Left unchallenged. Accepted as true. Before change (personal or public) is possible, we have to expose our beliefs for scrutiny. We have to define and challenge the beliefs we currently hold. Solutions, suggestions and strategies are very much imbued with our beliefs. Sharing common ground provides space to explore and expand on conversations about writing, and it is these conversations that can provide the impetus to move the field of writing forward.

One strategy I have found helpful in clarifying my beliefs about writing is to make a list of distinctions between what I believe writing is, and what it is not. My list is on the next page. You might like to do the same.
In my classroom, writing is … | In my classroom, writing is not …
---|---
• a means of making messages clear and powerful so others know what I think | • sets of formulae taught through a series of exercises
• an instrument for fulfilling a range of purposes for different audiences | • an assessment task attached to a scoring guide
• a way to discover who I am and what I think | • focused on handwriting, correct spelling and grammar
• a way to find out about others, ideas, the world | • responding to a teacher-directed prompt
• a recursive process that includes drafting, revision, editing and publication | • competitive
• connected to reading | • cute or contrived
• communicating clear and meaningful messages | • cutting and pasting
• for entertaining, informing and persuading | • regurgitating content
• developmental | • a set of steps to be followed in hierarchical order
• a gateway to literacy | • a curriculum guide
• influenced by complex and interrelated influences – cognitive, social, cultural, psychological, linguistic and technological | • a style manual

A conscious effort to become a writer

Teachers need to write. When teachers participate in sustained engagement in acts of writing, teamed with opportunities for reflection in communities of practice, their identities as writers are transformed. Good news research via the National Writing Project in the US (1974–ongoing), New Zealand (2009–2011) and the UK (2009–ongoing) shows that these transformative changes in turn lead to positive changes in pedagogical practice. This is the best reason to start writing today and to build a community of writers in your classroom (and staffroom) with whom you can share.

I suggest that in the first week of every term, instead of conferencing during sustained writing time, teachers write in their own writer’s notebook. It serves two purposes. One, it highlights that this is a writing community and we are all members of it; and two, for teachers who are time-poor and want to experience what writers know and do, there are no excuses. Over the course of a week, you will gain insights into what students are being asked to do and how it feels to write on a daily basis about topics of your choice.

We sharpen our perceptions, collaborate and learn vicariously from the texts we read: that’s books we read aloud, the quality literature our students read independently and share with us, and the books, manuals, recipes, emails, billboards and information texts we read for leisure and, of course, through professional reading. With an eye on the prize, books train us to read like writers and give us access to the stylistic devices of the masters of the craft. Ray (1999) suggests that every open text is an invitation to visit the craftsperson’s gallery. Rest assured, whether you are a confident, competent writer or someone who struggles to write, no-one really masters writing 100%. It is not an exact science and there is no perfect text. Lamott (2018, p. 28) laments that:

Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and is the main obstacle between you and the first draft. Perfection will ruin your writing, blocking inventiveness and playfulness and life forces.
Reflections
For the writing teacher

When you think about ...

• the kind of writers you want your students to be
• the writing futures you want them to have
• the writing community you want to create
• and the kind of writing teacher you aspire to be

what barriers come to mind?

Great teachers at school kicked off my passion. We had a wonderful library with a sunken cushion-filled well in the centre and my grade 4 teacher Miss Gray installed our very own library in our class based on an honour system of borrowing and returning. These are some of my most precious childhood memories.

Deborah Abela
Author of The Stupendously Spectacular Spelling Bee

What do you hope your students remember about their literacy experiences with you?