

# Writing tasks: group activity

**Collection:** The Subject & pedagogy

**Resource:** Writing & the teacher

## Approximate duration

An hour for the preliminary activity. After that in the hands of individuals.

## Learning outcomes

An activity like this is inherently unpredictable, and for that reason learning outcomes can only be obliquely suggested. We suggest that temporary distraction from the conscious tasks of planning may open up awareness of underlying personal themes that bear on the individual's insight and effectiveness as a teacher. Imaginative writing of this kind may thus lead to insight into blockages and inhibitions in the way of exploiting one's capacity to the full. On a more positive note, the task of re-imagining enables re-framing of the normal and the conventional in ways that elicit creative pedagogic thinking.

## Introduction

Students write; academics write. If they are literary or language scholars they write books and articles. If they are in creative writing they write novels, stories, poems. The suggestion here is that we might sometimes use the medium of writing (so fundamental to our subjects) in a different way. To use its imaginative modality as a medium for thinking about teaching, and surfacing the dilemmas of professional life.

*Our argument ... is that the operation of the artistic imagination through the writing of fiction can be understood, precisely, as a mode of critical reflection upon and re-interpretation of, experience. (Richard Winter, Alyson Buck, and Paula Sobiechowska, Professional experience and the Investigative Imagination: The Art of Reflective Writing. London: Routledge 1999: 15.)*

**1** | This resource is part of a set of professional development resources for Higher Education English (including English Literature, English Language & Creative Writing) called 'The Pool'. The resources were developed by the English Subject Centre in 2011 as part of a JISC/HEA Open Educational Resources (OER) Project.

This work by English Subject Centre is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 UK: England & Wales License.

So the object of this resource is to enable teachers and supporters of learning to explore the way in which their values and experience inform their minute-to-minute pedagogic decisions. The method proposes not only to help participants capture the fine grain of pedagogic experience, but to reflect on how professional knowledge is activated in serial reality. What prompts the spur of the moment decisions that we have to take? How do personal experience, 'evidence-informed' pedagogic knowledge, our sense of our own professional identity, or our own fantasies and fears influence the way we react in the here and now of the pedagogic encounter?

The resource is based on the premise that both reading and writing are active rather than passive processes that require those involved to think about perspectives, reframing and representation. To carry out structured writing tasks is to engage in a process of re-symbolization and to use metaphor and parable as equipment for reflection. Imaginative writing can be used, therefore, as a tool for thinking and learning even by those who have not formally studied language, literature, or creative writing. By making the familiar strange, metaphoric prompting can be a road to surprising insight.

In order to promote learning in others we, as teachers, need to experience new learning processes ourselves. To assist learning in others we have not only to be learners ourselves but also to be critically aware of that process with all its pleasures and discomforts, achievements and mistakes. In approaching teaching dilemmas in a different way through imaginative writing, you may be able both to experience an unfamiliar learning process and use that experience to generate new insights into your teaching. An emphasis on the 'student experience' does not oblige teachers to lose nourishing contact with their own reflective learning: students actually benefit when their teachers and mentors are in touch with the sources of their own learning. Nor should we be sentimental about this process. It is also the case that teachers may at times feel more ambivalence both towards their subject and towards their students than the more campfire revival aspects proponents of 'learning and teaching' tend to imply. Writing may provide a way of making space for and talking to negative feelings rather than simply sweeping them aside or letting them corrode all your dealings with students and colleagues.

**2 |** *This resource is part of a set of professional development resources for Higher Education English (including English Literature, English Language & Creative Writing) called 'The Pool'. The resources were developed by the English Subject Centre in 2011 as part of a JISC/HEA Open Educational Resources (OER) Project.*

*This work by English Subject Centre is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 UK: England & Wales License.*



The activity suggested below originated as a workshop task, and can be easily re-adapted. If used in a group, we suggest that the first individual writing task be followed by a short period of conversation in pairs where each takes turns to describe their 'kernel' or moment to the other. A few minutes of comparing notes is likely to sharpen perception and memory, and bring out aspects of the 'moment' that were not at first apparent. After the second task (which could be performed out of class time), we suggest that a further period of sharing in small groups may help individuals to develop their writing further. These discussions could be given further shape by suggesting that groups focus on what was foregrounded or backgrounded in different variations on the theme. This could then in turn lead to a discussion of the metaphors that the writer found him / herself using.

## The activity

### *Initial writing task*

This is a vignette which will act as a kernel for the subsequent writing task. Please write a few lines summarising an encounter from your teaching or organizational experience. (This could, if you like, be the experience of being 'on the receiving end'.) This moment of experience does not have to be 'true' in a strictly factual, court of law, sense. To capture something important it may be necessary to exaggerate, to roll several episodes into one, to change a place, a gender, or the scene. This is a bit like what fiction writers do when they work with their own experience. If you are stuck, try to picture the visual setting as precisely as you can.

### *Second writing task*

Write one or more variations on your initial text. For example:

- Re-write in the present tense ('sees' for 'saw')
- Change the 'person' (i.e. if you wrote as 'I', re-write as s/he) – re-writing in the second person ('you' for she) can also be interesting
- Re-write from the point of view of a different participant or actor in the scene
- Pick out any metaphors you have used, and mind map them onto a sheet of paper, adding further associations

**3 |** This resource is part of a set of professional development resources for Higher Education English (including English Literature, English Language & Creative Writing) called 'The Pool'. The resources were developed by the English Subject Centre in 2011 as part of a JISC/HEA Open Educational Resources (OER) Project.

This work by English Subject Centre is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 UK: England & Wales License.



- Select a significant word or phrase and write down all the words which come into your head as you think about it
- Think of someone whose judgment you trust, and write down comments which he or she might make about the incident
- Think of someone who might disapprove of your part in the incident, and write down their comments
- Re-write as the first paragraph of a short story
- Re-write as a dialogue, e.g. a fragment of a radio play.

### Example

(reproduced with permission)

*Mr Benedict's bald head shone. The mullioned windows had leaded lights, like the bars of a cage, through which the trees and parked cars outside seemed a little crazed, jagged. 'Remember', he said, his bass voice sinking confidentially, 'if I throw a boy through that window I throw him so fast that the glass closes up again afterwards.'* The boys tittered, uneasily.

Change of tense ... Mr Benedict's bald head shines ... etc.

Change of point of view ...

*One more year's intake. How much longer can I bear this? Thirty little boys, their black blazers too big for them, their ties still neatly knotted. For now, they're nervous, respectful. But it won't last. I've seen other colleagues broken by them. Keep them in awe, start the way you mean to go on. Throw them a joke, but keep up the menace. Show them who's master, and you've got some hope of drilling French into their heads. And, more important still, of surviving yourself.*

Metaphor and simile (see below - could be drawn as 'mind map' with associations added)

... crazed ... jagged (shattered, shivered ... both have dual sets of connotation)

... bars of a cage (which is the inside?)

... glass ... throw = broken glass

**4 |** This resource is part of a set of professional development resources for Higher Education English (including English Literature, English Language & Creative Writing) called 'The Pool'. The resources were developed by the English Subject Centre in 2011 as part of a JISC/HEA Open Educational Resources (OER) Project.

This work by English Subject Centre is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 UK: England & Wales License.



## Links & References

- Bolton, Gillie. *Therapeutic Potential of Creative Writing*. London: Jessica Kingsley. 1999.
- Hunt, Celia. *Therapeutic Dimensions of Autobiography in Creative Writing*. London: Jessica Kingsley. 2000.
- Hunt, Celia and Fiona Sampson. *Writing: Self and Reflexivity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave. 2006.
- Knights, Ben. *The Listening Reader: Fiction and Poetry for Counsellors and Psychotherapists*. London: Jessica Kingsley. 1995.
- Knights, Ben and Chris Thurgar-Dawson. *Active Reading: Transformative Writing in Literary Studies*. London: Continuum. 2006. (Chapter 8 is about writing in professional development)
- Richard Winter, Alyson Buck, and Paula Sobiechowska, *Professional experience and the Investigative Imagination: The Art of Reflective Writing*. London: Routledge 1999.

## Relationship to the Professional Standards Framework

- **Area of Activity 5:** Integration of research, scholarship and professional activities with teaching and supporting learning
- **Core Knowledge 2:** Appropriate methods for teaching and learning in the subject area and at the level of the academic programme
- **Professional Values 3:** Commitment to the development of learning communities
- **Professional Values 5:** Commitment to continuing professional development and evaluation of practice.

More information about the Professional Standards Framework can be obtained from the summary factsheet in the Subject & Pedagogy Collection in HumBox.

<http://humbox.ac.uk/2731/>

---

5 | This resource is part of a set of professional development resources for Higher Education English (including English Literature, English Language & Creative Writing) called 'The Pool'. The resources were developed by the English Subject Centre in 2011 as part of a JISC/HEA Open Educational Resources (OER) Project.

This work by English Subject Centre is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 UK: England & Wales License.



## Resources in the *Subject and Pedagogy* Collection

- Subject and pedagogy: introduction to the collection
- Working with the English subject benchmark statement: resource overview
  - Using the English subject benchmark: group activity
  - Using the English subject benchmark: individual activity
- Working with the Creative Writing subject benchmark statement: resource overview
  - Using the Creative Writing subject benchmark: group activity
  - Using the Creative Writing subject benchmark: individual activity
- Writing and the teacher: resource overview
  - **Writing tasks: group activity (\* you are here)**
  - Metaphors: group activity
- Hearing yourself teach: resource overview
  - Keeping a teaching journal: individual activity
- Working with threshold concepts: resource overview
  - Crossing the line: individual activity
  - Crossing the line: group activity

