Ten strategies

Speaking, listening, reading, thinking and writing can all be part of a rich dialogical process. In fact, there may be great advantages in finding out how best to use them together so that each can support and enhance all the others. I offer the following general strategies for navigating a route towards better dialogue, thinking and writing. Detailed ideas and methods for putting the strategies into practice will follow in later chapters.

My emphasis is on non-fiction writing for exposition, exploration, argument, information and persuasion. However, some of the strategies and practices presented to enhance nonfiction may be applicable to other kinds of writing. Also, we should not forget that genres of writing infuse each other. Characters in stories present arguments and within arguments there are episodes of narrative. Poems organise ideas and ideas inspire poetry.

I am assuming that dialogue, with its qualities of responsiveness and shared inquiry, is something that teachers reading this will aiming for. Philosophy for children (p4c) is an educational initiative built on the aspiration for dialogue about questions that matter. The community of inquiry, distinctive of p4c, is a context wherein where dialogical talking and writing can thrive and where classroom discussion will provide inspiration for writing of all kinds.

STRATEGY 1: *Take a view of writing that is broad and deep*

It is possible to think of writing simply as the making of any significant marks such a notch on a stick for memorisation or a thumb print as proof of identity. It is also possible, and quite common, to limit its meaning to the elaborated, grammatically-structured text produced by a writer for an 'audience' of readers.

For educational purposes, the first is too wide and the second too narrow. For in between these two poles there lies a broad and deep territory of writing that most people (including children) inhabit when they need to discover, record and develop their thoughts. Such writing includes:

- Coherent lists – to do lists and plans; inventories of interests; catalogues of favourite and significant things; shopping and wish lists; collections of questions and themes that matter to the author; bright ideas one is determined not to forget. The lists are coherent because there is a conceptual organising principle such as *category*, *part-whole*, *pro-con*, *similar-different*, *cause-effect* and *important*.
- Lists where the organising principle has a spacial manifestation so the list becomes a graphic organiser, ideas map, affinity diagram *etc*. These designed lists are sometimes called visual tools but they are non the less forms of writing.
- Brief snippets of thinking written quickly in note form, or with more grammatical elaboration expressing thoughts and imaginings.
- Notes on reading, sometimes in the margins of texts.
- Copyings out of sentences written by others that have an impact on one's thinking.
- The gist of thoughts one doesn't want to forget and may want to revise and elaborate.

These kinds of 'ideas-writing' are tremendously valuable for everyone. Even professional writers will do more ideas-writing than writing for publication. The first piece of advice most published writers give to beginners is 'keep a notebook and make sure you write.' The more expert children become at ordering their ideas through writing, the more their intellectual capacities will grow and the more control they will eventually have over their more considered and grammatically-sophisticated writing.[1] Writing for ideas and writing for ideas *and* expression (*ie*, edited, grammatically-structured text intended for an audience other than the writer) is a continuum. Our view of writing should be broad and deep enough to recognise that fact.

STRATEGY 2: Treat writing as wonderful but at the same time ordinary

Writing is a wonderful tool not only for informing, persuading and entertaining others but for remembering, exploring, thinking, analysing, reflecting and imagining for oneself. Children arrive at school wanting to write, to make their significant marks and to tell teachers what the marks mean. Writing seems natural and so it is.

To think with pen or pencil in hand and to write down ones thoughts is empowering rather than threatening. With nourishment, writing for thinking, can survive the more difficult and high-risk challenge of writing for assessment, or writing in order to be understood by a distant reader without recourse to further conversation with the writer. If we can nurture ideas-writing as a low-risk activity then we will be helping pupils not only to think more effectively for themselves but also to link their own ideas-writing with the writing they do for an audience.

A danger associated with placing too much emphasis on high-risk writing for performance is that teachers coach pupils to reproduce the surface features of approved models of writing in order to made quick progress towards the appearance of sophistication that is thought to bring higher marks in examinations. The result is often writing that is muddled, uninteresting and too dependent on set constructions learned from 'writing frames', genre models and checklists of connectives. The children's own thoughts and intended meanings seem to get lost along the way.[2]

STRATEGY 3: Have pupils do plenty of low-risk, ideas-writing

Have pupils do ideas-writing to help them to gather thoughts and reflect on them privately or through shared dialogue. Don't make ideas-writing high-risk by marking it for correctness, genre features or grammar targets. Try out ways to guide pupils in their writing by suggesting they organise their ideas using conceptual frameworks such as *similar and different*, *example*, *opinion and reason*, *category, alternative, consequence* and *relative importance*. (Suggestions for ideas-writing will follow in later chapters.)

STRATEGY 4: Show pupils how writing helps you to think things through

Draw attention to the ways that the practice of writing ideas down, organising them conceptually and reflecting on them helps you to think. Draw attention to ideas-writing that has helped you do to think about some questions and topics you asking them to consider.

Demonstrate how ideas-writing can help the whole class to think together. You will already use plenty of ideas-writing in your day-to-day teaching (*ie*, your use of the black or white board). You just make the process more explicit and draw attention to its usefulness as an aid to memorisation and collaborative analysis.

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Strategy 5: Use 'ideas-writing' to stimulate extended writing.

When pupils regularly map their world and their thinking with short pieces of ideas-writing, you will gain insights into their interests and their perceptions of what is important and significant. You will be able to negotiate with them how to develop their concerns into longer, more grammatically-elaborated pieces of writing for themselves and others.

The generating, gathering, sorting and reflecting that pupils do when writing short idea-texts is part of the same process as the composing they do for longer, more elaborated pieces.[3] Both involve first creating a chaos of 'first thoughts' and then making meaning out of the chaos using conceptual frameworks. Denying learners the opportunity to work through these processes will make them too dependent on teachers to provide ready-made starter ideas and 'fill-in-the-blanks' writing structures.

Strategy 6: Make writing part of dialogic teaching[4] and learning

Whether pupils write lists, brief notes, diagrams or extended pieces, you can use their texts to stimulate and support dialogue. Gather written ideas together and summarise them for further discussion, have pupils elaborate orally on their ideas-writing and ask them to identify similarities and differences between the points of view revealed by the process. Use some of the pupils' extended writing to stimulate further questioning and inquiry.

You could precede an oral discussion by setting pupils to do some ideas-writing or you could use a session of ideas-writing *during* an oral discussion so that pupils gather and organise their thoughts before continuing to talk again. Finally, you could use pupils' writing to stimulate written responses from other pupils. Dialogue can be in the medium of writing as well as through speaking and listening. In fact, writing and oral dialogue can be used successfully in combination within an enlarged conception of dialogue as responsiveness.

Strategy 7: Don't overestimate either the difficulty of writing or the easiness of oral dialogue. Use them together to develop thinking and each other

Some teachers seek, in oral dialogue, an escape from the so called 'literacy barrier' to children's thinking. In using the term 'literacy barrier' they are talking about the anxiety that elaborated, high-risk writing provokes. The result of that anxiety is to stem the flow of ideas and the to-and-fro of question and response that is necessary for learning.

On the other hand, although ideas may flow more freely in oral dialogue, it seems that a minority of the pupils often do most of the talking. That is not to say that listening is worthless; on the contrary it makes dialogue possible. However, a teacher is bound to be worried if is some pupils talk a lot while others hardly say a word. Low-risk ideas-writing may succeed in eliciting responses from pupils who are normally silent.

We must also be aware of the considerable demands that oral dialogue in a group context places on the thinking, concentration, language skills and social skills of learners. In group dialogue, pupils will need to monitor themes, remember what is said, figure out connections, jump back several turns to someone's comment they wish to respond to, find words for what they want to say while at the same time continuing to listen, and so on. The teacher's own interventions can help pupils attune to what is going on in a dialogue, but taking part in oral dialogue in a medium to large group is a challenging task for all participants.[5]

The judicious use of ideas-writing before, during or after oral dialogue may help pupils to remember, gather, sort and articulate their ideas. Writing enables us to isolate ideas for reflection, making them seem distinct and open to analysis. It may even be argued as I. A. Richards does that: 'When we stop to consider what is being said, we are probably using powers of controlled, selective attention which we owe to experience with writing.[6]

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Strategy 8: Show pupils the connections between ideas, expression and editing

Ideas gain meaning[7] by being sorted using conceptual frameworks such as *category*, *similar and different*, *alternative, cause and consequence, opinion and reason,* and *important*. Ideas organised conceptually can be expressed in different ways. For example, a causal connection between global warming and greenhouse gasses might be expressed in many forms including:

- 'Excessive emission of greenhouse gases makes the world a warmer place.'
- 'The world's climate is getting warmer because people produce too much greenhouse gas.'
- 'Greenhouse gases lead to warmer temperatures.'
- 'Global warming arises from the excessive emission of greenhouse gases.'
- 'Pay attention! Greenhouse gasses cause global warming.

Editing (including revising) is the method of honing the meaning and impact of writing by working on expression. Show pupils how to develop their grammatically-extended writing from gathering their ideas, to sorting and shaping the ideas using conceptual frameworks, to editing for honing expression and meaning. Grammatically-elaborated writing can be of any length from a single sentence upwards.

STRATEGY 9: Share written ideas, compare expression, and emphasise choice

Editing to hone expression and meaning involves: selection and choice, an awareness of possibilities and a continuing audit of meaning. Teachers can draw attention to a range of possibilities for expressing ideas by sharing pieces of writing – by pupils' and themselves – with the whole class and trying out alternative possibilities for expression. The transition from *writing for ideas* to *writing for ideas plus expression* can thus be achieved through experiment and dialogue, rather that prescription and the mindless reproduction of recommended constructions. That is not to say that conventions and useful constructions will be kept from pupils, but that they will be introduced in a context of honing the meaning of some *particular* thoughts and comparing alternative forms of expression.

STRATEGY 10: Pupils learn to write from writers

Pupils learn to write from writers, including each other and their teachers, but most importantly from professional writers. Collect interesting, clear, elegant and affecting expressions from classroom and private reading. Encourage pupils to do likewise. The chosen writing should be short – from a sentence to a short paragraph – so pupils are able to reflect on it. Study each expression, discuss why it impresses and ask pupils to write 'parallel' pieces either expressing a similar idea in a different way or a different idea using a similar construction

Collect examples of pupil's writing and your own writing and use them in the same way. Make parallel writing a regular feature of your literacy work.

The next chapter will introduce the first steps for putting these principals into practice by making a distinction between writing for ideas (*i*-writing) and writing for ideas plus expression (*ie*-writing).

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ENDNOTES

1 Myra Barrs presents a persuasive case for recognising the value of listing as an organising structure that young children use naturally. Myra Barrs, 'Mapping the World', *English in Education*, Volume 21, Number 1, Spring 1987. She recommends that teachers take children's lists seriously. Listing is a sensible way of structuring inquiry and thinking, and provides a basis for writing more extended texts. Of course, listing is a significant tool for writers of all ages, not just for children.

2 I have written about this problem in an: 'Connectivitis and its remedies', *Teaching Thinking and Creativity*, Issue 25, 2008

3 See: Ann E. Berthoff, *Forming, Thinking, Writing,* Boynton/Cook, Heinemann. Berthoff reminds us of the connections between simple listing and the composition of more elaborate pieces: 'Listing is the composing process in a nutshell. Composing a list may seem a simple act, something we do rather thoughtlessly; nevertheless, virtually every aspect of composing is represented in listing: naming, grouping, classifying, sequencing, ordering, revising. Each of these operations can involve the others, which is why it's so difficult to talk about composition: everything leads to everything else.'

4 Robin Alexander makes a strong case for dialogic teaching in, Robin Alexander, *Towards Dialogic Teaching: Rethinking Classroom Talk*, Third Edition, 2006, Dialogos. He claims that dialogue is the foundation of learning because it allows interaction and engagement with knowledge and with the ideas of others. Through dialogue, he argues, teachers can most effectively intervene in the learning process by giving instant feedback, guidance and stimulation to learners. He draws on a long history of research and theoretical writing to support his case. He defines 'dialogue' in education as a special kind of talk, one which aims to achieve common understanding through 'structured cumulative questioning and discussions which guide and prompt … minimise risks and error, and expedite "handover" of concepts and principles' [to learners]. He does not, though, find a place for writing in his concept of dialogic teaching.

5 Philosophy for Children is powerful educational initiative based on classroom dialogue. Matthew Lipman does not underestimate its potential or its challenge: 'Children's philosophical conversations, when well organised and disciplined, provide a superlative opportunity for the sharpening of thinking skills, because verbal communication requires that each participant engage simultaneously and sequentially in a considerable number of mental acts.' Lipman, M (1988) *Philosophy Goes to School*. Temple University Press.

6 'The Reign of Writing' in *Richards of Rhetoric*, Edited by Ann E. Berthoff, Oxford University Press, 1991, p.239

7 Meaning is a term often used in education but rarely elaborated. The following list (by no means complete) is an adaptation, with alterations, of one by I.A. Richards. *The use of something (it); something it reminds you of; its place in a system; what you gain from it; its differences to other, similar, things; something important, striking or significant about it; a quality you perceive in it; what it makes you feel or imagine; the questions it stimulates and where the questions lead; the consequence of something.* See I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*, Kegan Paul, 1946. p.186

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