

# National Writing Project (UK)

## Ten Years and Still Writing

**Jeni Smith, Simon Wrigley and Theresa Gooda reflect on ten years of the National Writing Project (UK), with the help of NWP teacher colleagues.**

The NWP grew out of anger and love and the vivid evidence in every writing group we ran that writing together is transformative for teachers. Writing, we believe, is fundamentally human. It is a language mode that every one of us may use. It comes from the body, heart and mind – as David Holbrook, quoting Yeats, said: *‘Blood, imagination and intellect running together’*.

The anger was provoked by what we saw as an increasing disjunct between human qualities: empathy, respect for the child, self-awareness, the capacity to make sense of the world, and an insistence on external frameworks and rules. Teachers found themselves, still find themselves, disregarded as principled and knowledgeable members of a profession but rather expected to speak from an imposed script. Such an expectation does violence to teachers’ sense of themselves and their knowledge of those they teach. The script does violence to those they teach. And writing is learned from the inside out. It belongs to each one of us.

### Teachers’ writing groups

Our idea is simple. Based on the success of the US National Writing Project and prompted by the challenge set down by Richard Andrews’ proposal for a national

writing project for teachers (Andrews 2008), we set up a number of UK writing groups, led by teachers for teachers. The idea was to revive teachers’ sense of agency and professional community. By working together in self-help groups, teachers are empowered to improve writing in schools. Through a mutual commitment to enquiry, teachers make their own discoveries and through sharing, develop a collective wisdom.

Teachers’ writing groups are communities of practice (Wenger 1999). It is through these communities that we are growing craft knowledge that goes beyond the limitations of the current National Curriculum and which is different from the knowledge that published writers may bring to the table. These are communities of teacher writers. Though many do publish (academic papers, blogs, poetry, fiction), the conversation always returns to our students, our practice. The knowledge that we each hold is threaded through with our commitment to teaching. We remember why we became English teachers. It is a living part of us. A writing workshop for teachers is no more indulgent or less vital than an RSC workshop on tragedy or, indeed, one that trawls through the latest exam syllabus.

**“Writing is fundamentally human. It comes from the body, heart and mind. It is learned from the inside out. It belongs to each one of us.”**

“The principles of the National Writing Project have run through everything that I’ve done. Against the backdrop of endless change and the barrage of ever-falling edicts from above, it has given me the confidence to state that I am my own expert, that I have the agency to change the way that things are done, to make the experience of writing better and more enjoyable for the children that I teach.”

Here is Helen Atkinson remembering her first, transformative, workshop:

*It’s the end of June, 2008 and I breathe a guilty sigh of relief as I climb into a teacher friend’s car and begin the drive from London to Cambridge. It’s been another long academic year – when are they not? I’ve had my first taste of middle leadership with an Acting Head of English job in a tough North London school and I’m not certain that I have the energy to get through those final weeks. I’m on my way to Cambridge for the LATE summer conference where I should have elected for a useful weekend workshop on using digital sources when teaching Shakespeare, something that will provide a bank of activities that I can take back to the Department, proof that the CPD budget was a worthy spend. Instead, I have taken a selfish risk and ticked the box to attend a series of workshops called Teachers As Writers that will fill almost all of my time at the conference. The blurb promises that I will spend my weekend on my own personal, reflective and creative writing and this sounds both glorious and very self-indulgent. Ironically, at the end of this weekend, I have not only rediscovered my passion for writing but have experienced the beginning of the greatest and longest lasting influence on my pedagogy and practice.*

*For over ten years now, the principles of the National Writing Project have run through everything that I’ve done.*

*It is a series of professional networks that explore the way we teach writing in the best possible way: by writing ourselves and by discussing not only what we write, but how and why it was written. Against the backdrop of endless change and the barrage of ever-falling edicts from above, it has given me the confidence to state that I am my own expert, that I have the agency to change the way that things are done, to make the experience of writing better and more enjoyable for the children that I teach. It’s given me the confidence to argue (and win) the case with Head Teachers for some writing to take place that is not marked for SPaG and a snappy WWW/EBI, to build new ways of teaching and feeding back on writing into the curriculum.*

*There have been so many Saturday mornings where I’ve lain in bed, as tired as I was on the way to that first conference. It’s felt a super-human effort to drag myself to a museum, gallery or park in central London for the half-termly writing group meeting, but I know that, by the time I leave in early afternoon, I will be wide-awake and brimming with energy and ideas about new things to write, new ways to write, new ways to teach writing. And I know that I am not alone in feeling this way.*

**Helen Atkinson**, London Free Spaces Group

### How has the project evolved?

The history of the project is well-documented on our website. The number of groups, all of them free, run by volunteers, has grown. At the time of writing, we are discovering how we can write together on-line. We appreciate even more the value of these spaces, both personally and professionally. There have been keynote lectures, conference workshops, a TEDx talk, residential retreats, links made with other organisations nationally and internationally. There have been publications, a series of papers, pamphlets, a book: Smith and Wrigley, (2016) *Introducing Teachers’ Writing Groups*.

Where NWP is embedded in teacher education, teachers are attuned to a more principled way of teaching writing. We would like to see this work extended. Most importantly, the work of teachers’ writing groups continues and, with them, the drive to research and document what we are learning. Here is where the transformations take place. Here teachers find their voices. Here teachers rediscover and reimagine the teaching of writing.

### What have we learned?

#### ... about writing

The complexity of writing – how it tugs unevenly at writers’ social, emotional and rational resources, how it can help us approach uncertainty, discover new things, restore us to ourselves – means that unless teachers write themselves, their writing classrooms will be restricted to convention, rather than energised by their own insights and reflected experience.

We believe that writing is predominantly learned rather than taught. That there is no monolithic process of writing but many processes – and these are recursive

**Sam Brackenbury:** *I like the free-writing and the many directions this takes your thoughts before the discussion of words, listing and listening; enjoying the connections and sounds as collections are shared. The wonder when a random run of words incidentally creates something interesting, funny or poignant is always magic.*

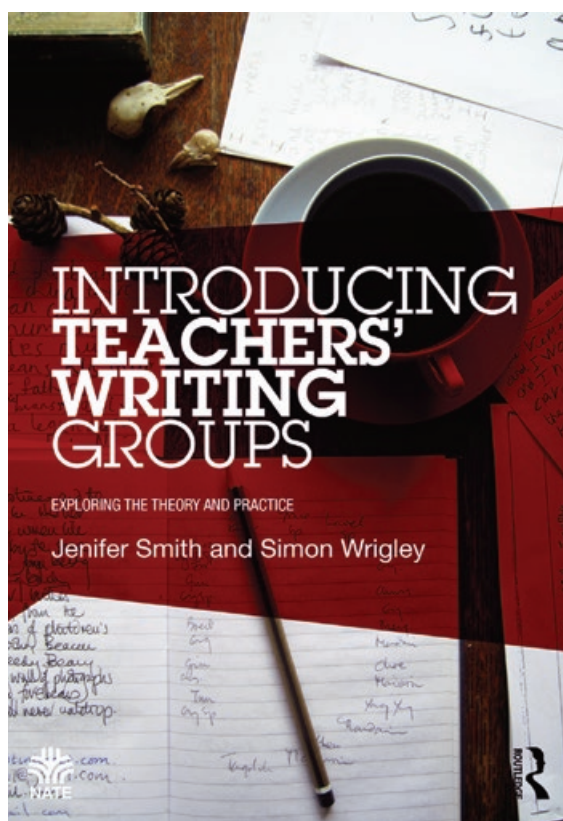
**Theresa Gooda:** *I have found the residencies and retreats like sustenance, reminding me periodically about the idiosyncratic nature of writing and how the rules and formulas that we are sometimes forced to fall back on in school to chase examination success are always a false economy. I value the pedagogic discussion and the continuous process of writing renewal that they offer. Whatever happens in a meeting seems to worm its way into my lessons somehow.*

not linear, move from parts to wholes and, as often, from wholes to parts. We understand the value of low-stakes high-investment writing, which is often where we all, adults and children, find our voices and learn how to be in charge of our own writing, rather than bending to the rules of others. We understand the value of careful and affirmative listening, which allows us to refine our writing and to work with rigour and intensity.

The rhythms of writing are uneven. Writing may depend as much on walking and dreaming as on planned and conscious ordering. Individuals will find their own strategies and rhythms and these discoveries inform their teaching. All this is enhanced by working in and with a group of teacher writers.



**Theresa Gooda:** I came to a couple of NWP sessions at NATE conference. They were instantly transformative, reshaping writing for me personally, and reframing my teaching of writing. I remember being terrified to share what I had written during the first session, seeing only its flaws and inadequacies. That was the last time I ever demanded that a student in my own lesson read something out. Now I make sure that shared writing is always voluntary, but coax and encourage students to find that place where they feel empowered to give their work an audience.



When writing ourselves, we reconnect with the pressure, frustration and pleasure writing can bring. This connects us to our students and their barriers and successes as developing writers. Everyone's writing is valued, from experienced teacher to the youngest child.

#### ... about its value for children

Pupils deserve the best. They need teachers with experience of both writing and reading. They need teachers with credibility, who can make an authoritative contribution to curriculum design and pedagogy – and for that to be recognised and valued. Teachers who experience writing within the trust of NWP workshops recognise the importance of trust in classrooms.

Young writers need a balance of freedoms and structures. They need reassurance from experienced adults to trust and accept their own experience, to believe in themselves, to think for themselves and to practise the fluidity and elasticity of language, at the same time as they come to terms with some of its evolved conventions. There are plenty of examples of the ways in which this trust bears fruit.

**Rebecca Griffiths:** As a practitioner, I find myself immersed in the world of progress with little time to observe the multi-modal forms of writing which flourish in the classroom. However, it is apparent that the curriculum constraints cannot stop the creative minds of our youngest writers.

Through drama, role play, drawing and making marks, writing takes its form in ways that are purposeful to the individual child. It is through these experiences that I most enjoy writing collaboratively with children; finding and utilising writing opportunities through play. The classroom provides a unique research environment, a place to explore new ideas and experiment with ideas based upon current research. It is also a place to celebrate the accomplishments of all writers! This is where I write most, and this is where I love to write.

**Emily Rowe:** Children have understood it to be more than even just a method of communication; they have drilled down to the heart of writing and the purpose it serves in allowing freedom of expression, an escape from everyday life and the benefits which it holds in terms of wellbeing. One Year 6 boy said: 'If you're sad or anything then you can just let it out by writing a story and how you feel'

Sometimes, the children's freewriting is too personal to pick over its grammatical intentions – it often draws out children's deepest emotions. Another boy made clear his understanding of the benefits that freewriting can have on wellbeing: 'I mainly like freewriting because any bottled up ideas, you can just let them out, any emotions that you're holding in, you can just let them out and it's just good to freewrite.' I am better able to understand children both as writers and as individual members of my class through this practice.

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#### ... about how we can teach and how we have changed

As a survey of American NWP teachers discovered, the change in teachers is one of orientation rather than the adoption of a specific method. Teachers find their own ways to teach. They have found ways both within and outside the curriculum to spread creative affirmation and learning intelligence to their pupils. This is about rigour as well as sensitivity. The community of a writing group provides a touchstone.

**David Marshall:** *There's no doubt the NWP group has affected and improved my teaching of writing. I think the most important change is that it's helped me to understand how difficult writing actually is. It has given me much more empathy, because I know that I would struggle with certain tasks just as much as the children do. Thinking a bit like a writer also helps me to spot where improvements could be made in a child's work. It means I'm more able to see, not just what the child needs to do, but how. I can show them the way to make a change in their own writing.*

**Alison Jermak:** *Students I teach know that I teach writing differently. Some get excited when I introduce free writing, they enjoy the freedom of it and ask: 'When are we going to do free writing again?' Some are daunted by the blank page: 'Tell me what to say.' Individuals like it when I talk to them about pieces that they have written.*

**Theresa Gooda:** *I think my students always saw me as an 'expert reader', but since my involvement with NWP I think they would also consider me to be an 'expert writer' – and, more importantly, someone who truly values their voice. That's what we do as teachers, isn't it? Help young people to find their voice.*

**Sam Brackenbury:** *Attending a group regularly reminds me of the need to include more low-stakes, high-investment*

*opportunities as I know from the experiences of fellow attendees that these are powerful in allowing children to develop their own sense of voice and perceive themselves as a writer. I also know that I need to write more regularly alongside the children as well as teach, so that they see this development as important.*

**Gillian Pearson:** *If I'm writing with them, then we can have a proper dialogue about the work and share what we have got. My writers aren't always the best in the world, but they write unhindered, and at length, and are usually very happy to share their work. I think I am re-learning the importance of this from the writers' group: to help the children find their voice, to make a mark and create and discuss.*

**Katie Kibbler:** *Being part of NWP has improved my (wait for it) marking, feedback and analysis, too: it's so much more natural and genuine for me to say what I think is interesting about a piece of writing, why it is working, how it is working and what it is making me feel and think, now that I've started to regularly get inside writing myself and drive the car. It's made me simultaneously more rigorous about teaching writing, and more compassionate. Speaking from a position of 'I do this too, and we are in this together' is so powerful for the students. The teacher gets to be the person who writes with us, not the master who presents the task of writing to us.*

### ... about its power as professional development

When teachers write together they rediscover the nature of writing and they bring that understanding to those they teach. An overly rule-bound, product-oriented approach to writing restricts agency and excludes learners from motivating insights and pleasures. Writers, of whatever age, must be able to take possession of the act of writing in the same way they may possess reading and talk. They learn, for themselves, how writing works for them and what they can do through writing. When teachers write together

they deepen their understandings through writing and through professional conversations. Teachers' writing groups speak to a fuller, richer, more versatile notion of writing that goes well beyond technical proficiency or even 'creative writing'. It acknowledges the many affordances of writing which embrace fuller learning, well-being, an attentiveness to the world and to the other. As David Marshall observes, writing together is often a 'catalyst for important conversations.' Katie Kibbler adds: 'we take time to reflect on the process of writing as a person and as a professional: a teacher, and a human.'

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**Katie Kibbler:** Writing is not self-indulgent, it is being alive to the world around you. It isn't egoism to write; it is empathy. Writing in NWP groups has made me simultaneously more rigorous about teaching writing, and more compassionate. Fundamental to this approach is writing alongside each other, enriching our collective understanding by re-evaluating our relationship with writing.

**Alison Jermak:** I value the support, the attention, the wisdom and the experience of my fellow NWP writers. Being part of the NWP has kept me in teaching. It's the type of learning experience that I had growing up and that made me want to become a teacher. It's something that I have a genuine interest in, I can practise writing, begin to master it by myself and together with the group

**David Marshall:** For me, the NWP is important because it's a writing community. I've joined writing workshops and courses, but there's something great about a community because you're there for each other over a long period of time and can build relationships. The meeting up for a chat is as important as writing together, sharing work and giving feedback. Often we find the writing leads on to a discussion about world events, politics and other things. It's like it's a catalyst for having important conversations that we don't often have at home or with our colleagues.

**Rebecca Griffiths:** Attending the group for the last 8 years has provided me with a network of educators who share a passion for writing. The group includes EYFS practitioners, A level teachers, and everyone in between. It provides an ever-changing dynamic: supportive yet challenging, always inspiring. The group has taught me so much about the way children write throughout their journey in education. It enabled me to see beyond Early Years. ... This group has shaped me as a writer and a teacher of writing.

**Sam Brackenbury:** NWP has formed a key part of my professional development. Just as the act of writing stimulates writing, the act of writing with other teachers develops your teaching of writing and your role as the chief facilitator in a community of writers. The sessions improve your awareness of the complexities and emotional investment that come with creating, meaning that you are more empathetic when listening, appraising and establishing routines for critique. Attending group meetings contributed to developing the courage to let the children go, believing they could talk well, splurge and then refine independently just as we had done when together. It is these writerly conversations and a focus on the process of writing over product, that has had the biggest transformation on my practice and ultimately the outcomes for those I teach – those that can be easily measured and those which are perhaps more difficult.

The project validates and strengthens the collective voice of writing teachers and we believe that everyone must be part of the conversation.

**Sam Brackenbury:** I hope the reach and influence of the project grows tremendously. The sessions are valuable to experienced and newly qualified teachers as they help to develop those who attend in different ways, the way that they need at that time, and this manifests in the learning opportunities they deliver to young people. The NWP could play a really key role in re-shaping the understanding and conceptualisation of writing in schools across the country, resulting in a teacher-led change to how it is taught and experienced in the classroom.

Teachers writing together gain confidence, develop subject knowledge and become powerful allies and agents of change. Many of us work in institutions where our professional autonomy is challenged and where a house style is demanded. NWP workshops strengthen our teaching of writing in whatever context. The experience allows us, at least, to enrich the prescribed curriculum. It provides the context for developing a well-considered pedagogy.

### Your turn!

Find two or three others, agree a time and space, meet once a week, month, half term, quarter. Meet in a classroom, a coffee shop, a museum, a forest, your own front room. Share ideas to get your writing going.

Take time to listen and respond. Talk about process and teaching and wherever the writing takes you. Shape the group in ways that work for you. There are dozens of ideas on the website, <https://www.nationalwritingproject.uk>. Contact us. We will help. We would love to hear from you. We'd like to put you on the writing map.

Very many thanks to all the teachers quoted here and who wrote much more than there was room to include here. Visit the website to read their full accounts.

### References

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### Simon Wrigley

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### Theresa Gooda

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# NWP ... On Brighton Beach

Theresa Gooda shares a session her group enjoyed on Brighton beach.

We began with a ‘seeding’ exercise: a quick list of **beach memories**.

Next we did some **sound scavenging**: recording all the sounds that we heard over the space of a couple of minutes, including speech (loud lady at the next table of the beach cafe was quoted extensively!) with an emphasis on capturing the quality of the sound in writing – phonetically or through onomatopoeic choices. Turns out that Brighton is very noisy!

This was followed by a **curated beach museum** where we each selected 3-4 ‘objects’ – (pebbles/shells/seaweed/driftwood/debris) and created a strange exhibition of imagined curiosities. Each object was given a title plaque and an imaginative, sometimes improbable history. Butcher catering pins were a useful prop for display in a collection

that included such treasures as the rare and precious porous bone fragments of the splintosaurus; early Sussex invaders’ armour, Mesolithic thumb jewellery, a fragment of Circe’s tunic woven on her infamous loom, and Javan wood remains from the esteemed work of an eighteenth century Sussex craftsman.

For additional **stimulus** we read Australian poet Deb Westbury’s ‘shells’, published in the anthology *Mouth to Mouth* (1990), which uses beach memories to explore ideas about aging. Then we settled down for a longer session of writing for ourselves.

Finally, after sharing, we did some ‘instant publishing’ by leaving poetry pebbles, containing a few words from what we had written, for someone else to find later on the beach.

