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PURPOSEFUL WRITING THE WADEYE WORKSHOP AND ITS BASIS

* Paul Black

Just as the test of the pudding is in the eating, the test of a piece of writing is how well it accomplishes the purpose for which it was written. If a story is written to entertain, then it is well written just to the extent it does this. On the other hand, we wouldn't expect a dictionary to be entertaining: it's purpose is to let us look up information about words. There are a wide variety of purposes writing can serve, and these give rise to different genres of writing.

In the classroom, however, it's not always easy to develop real purposes for writing. Often we settle for asking our students to pretend they are writing for real purposes, but, as Raimes (1984) noted, deep down in their hearts they know that they are really just writing for the teacher.

During the 1980s I was teacher under somewhat unusual circumstances that made it easy to find real purposes for writing. This was at the School of Australian Linguistics (in Batchelor, NT), where I was helping Aboriginal teachers and literacy workers improve their vernacular language and literacy skills for use in bilingual and other programs. In this situation it was usually easy to find things to write that could actually be used in these programs or in the community more generally. For example, books prepared by Torres Strait Islanders were kept in stock and sent out several times in later years for use in literacy and language programs developed and run by the Islanders themselves. As an example a community use for writing, some groups who came to Batchelor began their studies by writing letters about their trip and their program and sending them back home for publication in the local newsletter.

In 1990 I was again able to explore the writing of Aboriginal languages for real purposes in a workshop in Wadeye (Port Keats). After reporting on this workshop I will discuss

*Paul Black until recently has been on the staff of the Faculty of Education, Northern Territory University and as from April has taken up a two year visiting position at Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan.

the general principles behind my approach, since they can be applied to more common classroom situations. I hope the report itself also helps correct some misimpressions about vernacular writing in bilingual programs, which have involved much more than just writing the spoken language down in the hope of promoting language maintenance (cf. Martin, 1990, pp. 14-20). It also shows how vernacular literacy is already used for a variety of purposes in Wadeye, even though it has not been used as extensively as in such other communities as Amata (see Goddard, 1990).

The Workshop

The workshop was held in Wadeye from 10th to 14th September, 1990, as part of the Batchelor College teacher education program. The aim of this particular workshop was to develop the students' professional skills in Murrinh-Patha, the language used along with English in the local bilingual program. The participants included nine state one and two stage two students, all of whom were working in the bilingual program as part of their study. In running this workshop I was assisted by the local tutor for the Batchelor College program, Brother Vince Roche of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart School.

We began on Monday by considering the question, 'Why (i.e. for what purposes) do people want to read and write in Murrinh-Patha?' To be able to consider this question better we looked at some examples of English writing, including notices from a bulletin board, a personal letter, a story, a movement requisition, a dictionary, and an advertisement. We tried to answer the following key questions:

What were people trying to do by writing them?
and

How can we tell?

With the personal letter, for example, we saw that it was used to share news about the family, but also to help keep up family ties. We were able to tell that it was a personal letter because it was handwritten, it began with 'Dear George', and was dated and signed. With the dictionary we noted how it was designed to enable people to look up

information about words, and so it was arranged in alphabetical order and had guide words at the tops of the pages. For these and other pieces of writing we also considered what people might want to read them for, where we might find such writing, who might write it, and who might read it.

Talking about a "dilly-bag" approach to writing, we noted that how we judged a piece of writing depended on it's purpose. Women in Wadeye make different things out of palm fronds (*thithimampe*) and these have different purposes - baskets and dilly-bags for carrying things, nets of catching fish, and rugs for the floor. In the same way you can use writing for many different purposes. One wouldn't think much of a dilly-bag that had no bottom, because it couldn't carry anything, but a fishing net works in a different way. In the same way you wouldn't expect different kinds of writing to be the same, but you would judge each by the extent that it fulfils the purpose for which it was written. And just as women make their dilly-bags beautiful as well as functional, you can also make your writing beautiful as well as purposeful.

We then went on to look at four Murrinh-Patha books used in the bilingual program and discussed their purposes:

- A book about animal homes, whose purpose was to teach;
- A book about a historical event, designed to tell what happened;
- A Bible story, designed to teach moral values;
- A traditional story from another Aboriginal tribe, whose main purpose is to be "interesting" - to entertain and to let the reader find out about traditions of another group.

We began Tuesday by talking about the various uses of writing in Aboriginal languages. I started the discussion by pointing out how writing was being used in such other communities as Nguiu, on Bathurst Island, and Amata, in South Australia. Then the students worked in small groups to list ways in which Murrinh-Patha was used in writing. Putting their work together we ended up with the following types of writing and their purposes:

<u>Types of Writing</u>	<u>Purposes</u>
stories	for interest and entertainment
puzzles	for entertainment
hymn books	for worship
news and newsletters	to tell what happened
posters, notices	to tell what's going to happen
worksheets	for teaching
flashcards	for teaching
Bible translation	for worship and teaching values
charts	for teaching
tape labels and transcription	for telling what's on tapes
permission notes	to get permission from parents

To these we added such other possibilities as:

instructions (e.g. recipes)	to tell how to do something
policy statements/aims	to describe policy
journal writing	to reflect on learning
lesson plans	to help us teach

The rest of Tuesday was devoted to writing. Talking it over amongst themselves the students developed ideas about what things would be useful to write, and after writing down (a) what they were going to write, and (b) how they were going to put this writing to use, they got down to work. Six students made posters for a community disco scheduled for Saturday, and they put these around town after class or on the following morning. Another made a poster of rules for the school library. One wrote a letter to the local clinic to propose a meeting to share information about a health seminar the students had attended in Batchelor. She

wrote this in Murrinh-Patha for the Aboriginal staff and English for the non-Aboriginal staff. Others worked on materials they could use in their classes, namely a big book and a word puzzle.

In preparing their materials the students were already well experienced in a process writing approach of first preparing at least one rough draft and having at least one other student read it before they proceeded to the final product. Such "peer conferencing" allows students to share their various strengths with each other, and we were fortunate that three of the students were experienced as literacy workers for Murrinh-Patha. Brother Vince and I took advantage of our basic knowledge of the language and its writing system as we also talked with students about their work, but it was up to the students to help each other with any details of Murrinh-Patha expression that needed attention.

We finished the day with journal writing in Murrinh-Patha. As the students had done at a recent workshop in Batchelor, they wrote out journals by themselves or in pairs, and we posted them where all could see. Brother Vince and I did the same with our journals, which were in English. Journal writing continued on each remaining day, with each of us adding comments to someone else's journal and then writing more on our own.

On Wednesday morning many were ready to begin new projects. We talked a bit about needs analysis - ways of finding out what sorts of material would be useful to make - and then people went on working, many starting books they could use in class.

On Thursday we started with people sharing the work they had completed by reading it out, and then we talked about evaluation - as people put their work to use, they will notice how well it did or did not serve its purpose, and they might notice ways they can make it better next time. I also passed around the first draft of the workshop report you are now reading. The students found no reason to comment, but at least they could see that I was approaching a real writing task in the same way I was asking them to do.

On Friday we discussed evaluation further, and one of the students prepared forms in Murrinh-Patha that the students

could use to evaluate what they had written after they had actually put it to use. This student also reacted to limitations in Murrinh-Patha literacy in the community, which had become apparent during the workshop, by writing a note of concern for posting on the school staff bulletin board. Other students finished their projects or even began new ones, to be completed after the workshop.

Material produced in the workshop or its follow up including the following, some of which had already been put to use, and some of which was put to use in the school in later weeks:

- four posters advertising the disco
- a poster of rules for the library
- a letter to the local clinic
- a word puzzle
- a worksheet on syllables
- a blank form for obtaining parental permission for excursions
- two song sheets, transcribed from tape
- three big books for early primary classes
- two small story books
- a description of local government for a post-primary class
- a notice about the limited Murrinh-Patha literacy in the community
- a form for evaluating the use of the materials produced
- student journals

The material was varied but not as extensive as some might expect from a week's work. In part this was because

of the time needed for redrafting, as well as that we took for discussion. In addition, the students who prepared books for primary classrooms spent considerable time illustrating them. It was tempting to try to maximise the amount of writing during the week by asking students to leave other aspects of book production for later, but this abstraction of writing from the totality of what the students had set out to produce would have been false economy in a program devoted to writing for real purposes.

What Lay Behind the Workshop

The workshop used a "process writing" approach that I developed further at the School of Australian Linguistics to suit the particular needs of Aboriginal language education, as previously reported by Black (1987). In this I have also been influenced by "genre-based" approaches to writing.

Some advocates of genre-based approaches (e.g. Painter, 1986, p.88, Walton, 1990) have criticised process writing for reasons that seem unwarranted in terms of my own approach, or even in terms of process writing as described by Walshe (1982). Apparently they have been reacting against a rather mindless approach that may have been regrettably common in Australian schools, and is even enshrined in at least one curriculum document (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1985b, p.64). This is an example of the underlying principles. As I point out some of the principles I follow, I will also show how they are almost entirely compatible with the earlier process approach of Walshe (1982), and how criticisms levelled against process writing generally do not apply to either of our approaches.

Planning a teaching program begins with identifying goals. The main goal of the Wadeye workshop was to help the students' appreciate the need for purpose in writing while developing their Murrinh-Patha writing skills in a variety of useful genres.

It was the work of Fran Christie (e.g. 1984) and other systemic linguists that made me realise the importance of thinking in terms of genres. Walshe (1982) mentioned genre, but he himself did not take development in particular genres to be important in the primary school context with

which he was concerned. Later, however, it became apparent that children in process writing classroom were typically writing recounts rather than in a variety of more useful genres (Walton, 1990, p. 225). Clearly the goals of such writing programs were inadequate, but this is not due to the general nature of process approaches. The way Walshe (1982) related writing to purpose and to the context of various curriculum areas provides an excellent basis for concentrating on particular genres if one chooses to do so.

In addressing the goal of developing writing skills I think in terms of helping students find (a) purpose, (b) motivation to pursue it, and (c) any assistance they need to reach it. I say 'helping students' find these things because occasional students need little help, but I don't mean that teachers should wait to be asked for help: the ideal teacher knows what help students need before they themselves do.

By 'purpose' I mean specifically what it is that the student is trying to accomplish in writing (or other academic tasks). Walshe (1982, e.g. 47-49) stresses the importance of having real purposes, and hence real readers, for writing, so that the writing becomes a genuine medium of communication. If the purpose is simply to please the teacher or to conform to what seems to be a ritual called schooling, students have little reason to produce writing that does a good job of entertaining, informing, or convincing a reader. Developing both purpose and a sense of purpose may be especially important in Aboriginal classrooms (see M.J. Christie, 1985, pp. 46-51), but it is not clear that mainstream children need it less (see e.g. Holt, 1969, p. 19-46).

Walshe (1982) was less explicit about the relationship between purpose and genre. This relationship follows from the definition of genre as any activity, including writing, that proceeds in stages designed to accomplish a particular purpose in a culturally appropriate way; see e.g. Martin (1984, p. 25). The genres that students produce are thus heavily influenced by the purposes they are trying to accomplish. They are not fully determined by these purposes because genres are also dependent on - or better, are part of - culture. Non-mainstream children are thus likely to need more guidance than mainstream children in learning to replicate mainstream English genres. With regard to the

workshop this also meant that an understanding of English genres could not be taken as a basis for drawing conclusions about written genres as they are developing in Murrinh-Patha.

As Hammond (1987, p. 172) notes, the work of Fran Christie and others has made the link between language and the context in which it occurs one of the most important principles of the "genre-based" approach to teaching writing. Even so this principle is not always applied in genre-based approaches, as Elliott and McGregor (1989, p. 7-8) note. The Wadeye workshop and the present paper were in part a reaction to a failure to more consistently take advantage of the ways in which student writing depend crucially on its real functions in the context of the particular classroom.

There are various ways of establishing genuine writing tasks for developing student ability to write in particular genres. Some of the best tasks are those that lead students to communicate with the world outside of school: even a secondary school class can sometimes find good reason to prepare a petition or some other submission to government, for example. Attention to the writing required for other work in school is also valuable. This can be as sweeping as attention to 'writing across the curriculum' (WATC) or it can be based on a single subject; for an especially clever example see Heath's (1983, pp. 315-342) description of a science program that had students doing ethnographic research. In primary schools a 'concentrated language encounters' (CLE) approach (e.g. Northern Territory Department of Education, 1985a) is particularly valuable because it involves the creation of context that entails the use of reading, writing, speaking, and often other skills and knowledge as well; see also Gray (1986).

Even within such an approach as CLE some writing tasks will be more genuine than others. For example, my daughter's third grade class spent a term on a CLE program on a travel theme that involved SACE and maths (e.g. working out travel costs) as well as reading and writing in a variety of genres. This involved such genuine purposes as writing to embassies for information about their countries, but it also involved such other writing as producing pretend tickets and passports. The latter was a valuable part of the total learning experience, but notice how the writing involved lacked consequences of the

sort the letter writing had - since the tickets weren't real they could have been composed of squiggly lines, if the teacher would have allowed it, and yet serve their purpose just about as well.

Motivation can be enhanced by a sense of purpose and by the appeal for some particular purposes, but it involves many other factors as well. These range from the personal relationships that develop within the classroom to such broad matters as how the school is run. With regard to Aboriginal schools, for example, Wali Wunungmurra (1989, p.13) maintains that 'Yolngu (Aboriginal people) must own the school program. Without this we will feel crushed and lose our self respect and self identity - we will be living on other people's programs like it was in the past, in the mission days.'

Motivation can also be promoted or stifled by particular aspects of the pedagogical approach. In this regard process writing approaches tend to promote motivation by stressing student "ownership" of topic and writing. My own experience suggests that this is just as important for adult Aboriginal students engaged in purposeful learning as it is for mainstream students. Even though they may tend to be more cooperative and less competitive than some mainstream students (not including me), they can get just as dismayed as I do if their teacher takes liberties with their work. This is not surprising in view of the finely honed sense of ownership of language in Aboriginal cultures (see e.g. Sansom, 1980, pp. 24-26), even though the parameters of ownership may differ somewhat from those in mainstream Australian culture.

Process writing's stress on ownership is sometimes criticised as if it implied a laissez faire approach in which the teacher contributes very little. Perhaps this is what actually happened in such process writing classrooms as that mentioned by Martin, Christie, and Rothery (1987, p. 77), where allowing children given complete freedom of topic choice ended up writing on only four themes. Walshe (1982, p. 61), on the other hand, recommends giving students as much choice as the circumstances allow, but more generally he allows that topic choice can range from entirely student determined to entirely teacher determined. Later (pp. 106-112), in fact, he even gives more than five pages of suggestions for topics that might be originated by the teacher. Walshe also noted how such activities as excursions could be used help

students find topics, and also how topics could be constrained 'within curriculum limits' (Walshe, 1982, p. 66).

My own approach would place more emphasis on how topic choice was constrained by purpose. If the purpose was to obtain tourist information from by writing to an embassy, for example, there would be very little leeway in topic. To this extent I agree with advocates of genre-based approaches that topics should tend to 'Arise from shared attention and experience' (see Walton, 1990, 232). Some purposes are less constraining, however, and in such cases, I would typically point out various possibilities and then have the students talk them over amongst themselves as they chose appropriate topics - an approach entirely in accord with Walshe (1982). Hopefully they would all end up with topics I felt to be worthwhile - one could ensure this by limiting choice to just the possibilities given - but in any case they would be writing on the topics they preferred to deal with.

The assistance provided in process writing approaches is partly indirect, by 'building a "writing community" in which children write willingly and thoughtfully and so chiefly learn to write by writing itself' (Walshe, 1982, p. 11). This is based on the belief that the actual patterns of behaviour in classrooms, or more precisely what Fran Christie (e.g. 1985) would later refer to as 'curriculum genres', are at least as important to learning as whatever the teacher purports to teach explicitly. The "writing community" must be 'built' because it doesn't happen on its own accord - certainly not in Aboriginal communities without strong traditions of reading and writing. And it must be built carefully to ensure that students get all the support they need. After all, the process writing movement developed in reaction to earlier practices in which students were asked to produce a finished product, but were given little useful support in learning how to do this.

Direct assistance is also given, by both teacher and other students, as it is needed. The approach is to 'allow each child to write at his or her level about real concerns and then the teacher and classmates can draw attention to weaknesses of mechanics, grammar and craft as they appear. In short, LET THEM WRITE, and only then *teach at the point of revealed need*' (Walshe, 1982, p.11; with his emphasis).

The preferred mode of teaching is through small group interaction, including various types of 'conferencing'. Since there is no single path to writing suits all writers or even all writing tasks, Walshe (1982, p.11) stresses that 'each child must discover his or her own "process"'. The context should make it clear that the child is not expected to 'discover' this without all due help, keeping in mind that help is most effective when it leads the child to discovery.

Process writing's concern for the individual sometimes seems to be misunderstood, as if denied the importance of social interaction to language development; see e.g. Walton (1990, p. 229-231). Like Bruner (1986, p. 127), Walshe recognised that negotiation and sharing were important in addition to discovery and invention:

the conference approach balances the individualism with many kinds of *sharing* - through child-and-teacher conferences, whole class 'share sessions', encouragement of writing partners, a workshop environment in which 'word talk' is natural, and the overall spirit of an animated 'writing community.' (Walshe, 1982, p. 133)

In the Wadeye workshop and elsewhere I may well have depended more on 'whole class "share sessions"' than Walshe would find useful to do in a mainstream primary classroom. My approach involves an element Walshe does not discuss, namely a recognition that the communication of ideas depends on shared understandings that develop through shared experiences. I was first introduced to this idea by colleagues at Batchelor College, and I began to appreciate it more fully as I became acquainted with what is known as "schema theory"; see e.g. Rumelhart (1980) for an introduction. Because of this I also believe in negotiating the joint construction of texts with some classes along lines suggested by advocates of the genre-based approach, although I have done this only to the extent that I felt it appropriate for my classes to work on English texts.

Apparently joint construction is sometimes thought to be incompatible with process writing (see Walton, 1990, p. 229-230). I see it as an essential part of building the

"writing community" sought by Walshe and not in conflict with Walshe's (1982, pp. 10-11) principle of not teaching the details of mechanics, grammar, and "craft" (e.g. genre) except at the point of revealed need. I also see no conflict between joint constructions and respect for "ownership".

With regard to "ownership", another criticism of process writing has been that the approaches used in conferencing 'leave the entire responsibility for the production of the text in the child's hands' (Painter, 1986, p. 84). As quoted here this is *literally* true - children are expected to accept *responsibility* for their writing - but this does not mean that the teacher does not intervene in the writing process (conferencing is one form of intervention) or provide the student with whatever assistance is called for, including specifics of grammar and mechanics (see Walshe, 1982, p. 125). At the same time, process writing stresses student responsibility in a way that encourages students to 'assume greater control of setting their own learning goals and to collaborate actively with each other in achieving these goals', which is what Cummins (1986, p. 28) says about pedagogical approaches designed to empower minority students.

In dealing with such languages as Murrinh-Patha I have grown to appreciate how a process writing approach need not depend on my own ability to intervene in the writing process as a fluent authority and thus does not take control of the language from its speakers. This is not only because I use peer conferencing, but also because I depend more heavily on the development of an environment that encourages and supports purposeful writing than I do on teacher authority. Can similar approaches help Aboriginal children master the genres of written English? Only if they are applied carefully, with judicious regard for how the principles on which they are based should apply to the situation at hand. But this is true to any approach.

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