

Finding a Voice: Oracy in the Writing Workshop

Walter Hines Page Scholarship Research Report

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Introduction

From the horrors of Stephen King to Alcott's *Little Women*, the USA's literary Northeast has a well-earned reputation for spawning successful writers. As an English teacher, bookworm and writer, there was no question that this area was going to be my first and only geographical focus when carrying out the research that would see me awarded the 2019 Walter Hines Page scholarship by the English Speaking Union and my teaching union, the NASUWT.

In January 2020, I undertook a two-week visit to America's Northeast, travelling across the states of New York, Vermont, Maine, New Hampshire and Massachusetts in a mammoth pick-up truck! The focus of my research was how writing workshops can significantly impact literacy (both emotional and academic), oracy and, crucially, emotional wellbeing in young people.

After extensive Googling, reading of publications, travel calculations (I ended up driving over 2000 miles), emailing and Skype-ing, I settled on the following itinerary, encompassing visits to schools and writing organisations:

- Olean High School, Olean, New York
- Oswego Middle School, Oswego, New York
- Montpelier High School, Montpelier, Vermont
- The Telling Room, Portland, Maine
- 826 Boston, Boston, Massachusetts



Additionally, I was able to incorporate a number of incredible cultural experiences into my travels - cheering on a high school basketball game, sampling Maine lobster and touring Louisa May Alcott's home - that only fuelled my existing love of all things American.

Background to the question

As much as I am both personally and professionally passionate about creative writing, I believe it is an area of the English curriculum that is somewhat underserved. I cannot help but feel that creative writing (for example: poetry, prose, drama, reflective and opinion writing) is often viewed as of less academic merit than, say, critical essay writing. Some of my colleagues admit to a lack of confidence when it comes to teaching writing that can be experimental, unstructured and personal. There is also the worry that assessing or grading a piece of creative writing can be subjective. Moreover, when it is taught, young people often respond to the idea of expressing themselves on paper with, at best, apathy and, at

worst, terror. And heaven forbid they are expected to discuss their own and others' writing! I was - and am - keen to address these attitudes and overhaul pedagogical approaches to creative writing by implementing a range of workshopping strategies that are exemplified in the US. I am steadfast in the belief that placing greater value on talking about writing can have a monumental impact on our young people academically, socially and emotionally.

One of the key national priorities in education remains the drive to raise attainment for all, closing the attainment gap. The findings of the *Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy* indicate that a child's academic progress peaks during Primary 7. By S2, results in all areas (reading, writing, talking and listening) have dropped significantly. To exemplify: when talking skills were assessed in Primary 7, pupils' progress was at its highest, where 67% of children were performing "well, very well or beyond their level." When the same children were assessed again in S2, only 49% were performing "well, very well or beyond their level." Clearly, in these formative early-teenage years, there is a dip in attainment that is, thus far, unaccounted for. Even colloquially, my colleagues and I often note (somewhat helplessly) the gradual yet dramatic change in a young person from their arrival into S1 as unreserved youngsters with hands stretched to the ceiling, to apathetic, reticent husks by the end of S2!

These crucial years in a child's development are crying out for something that will empower them and support academic and emotional progress. Recent statistics suggest that 33% of teenagers experience some form of mental health issue. With ongoing funding cuts to mental health youth support services, there has never been a greater need to provide our young people with a safe, supported outlet for what is so often internalised. In a writing workshop setting, one of the main aims is to create a safe space where pupils feel able to externalise their thinking and ideas. I cannot imagine a scenario that would more benefit from an 'injection of Americanism' - the ethos of self-assuredness and openness that is ubiquitous in the States and so often lacking in Scottish culture.

Furthermore, the *SSLN* also uncovered that the 'performance gap' between our most deprived and least deprived pupils has been sustained in each year of the survey's findings. The least deprived pupils consistently outperformed the most deprived pupils in the country by 15-20% across all areas of the curriculum. I believe that writing workshops in the classroom can create a powerful equality of voice amongst all pupils and can go some way to closing the gap. Creating opportunities for purposeful, quality talk empowers and impacts on an individual's learning process. The skill of oracy is one which must be implemented in classrooms with a greater focus, the same focus given to literacy. A 2005 UK study found:

in the average secondary school in a disadvantaged community, students spoke approximately four words a lesson, equating to just over two hours of purposeful classroom talk across their secondary school career. Some students may have natural ability and confidence as speakers, others benefit from the modelling of eloquence and opportunities to become practised in discussion techniques around the dinner table in

their homes. For many, however, the lack of any explicit, consistent and sustained development of their speaking skills in schools means they are denied education in this crucial skill... oracy becomes the preserve of a self-selecting few, exacerbating inequality and gaps in confidence and achievement. (Earnshaw. 2016)

I am genuinely horrified by this finding. It can be easy to overlook the importance of hearing a pupil's voice and, on reflection, there have probably been whole weeks that have passed where I have not ensured I have heard every single voice in my classroom. This simply cannot be. It is glaringly obvious that we are doing our pupils a disservice if we do not create opportunities for meaningful talk in our classrooms. Galton asserts: "Talk allows you to construct and then reconstruct ideas, which is the major way in which we learn." Oft-quoted educational theorist Vygotsky proposed that children develop their understanding of the world, and many of their cognitive abilities, through interaction with the people around them. Further, promoting quality classroom talk is promoting a key skill for life. Mercer claims that the impact of talk in the classroom can have lasting and profound effects: "Teaching children how to use the spoken language is not only important because it contributes to the development of their thinking skills; effective ways of communicating through speech have high social value, and learning them can help children participate more successfully in society." Equipping children with the ability to hold a conversation with peers and adults develops crucial social skills which will resonate into adulthood. The link between oracy and achievement for all cannot be overstated.

Even before my trip, the more I researched and contacted American schools and teachers, the more certain I was the cultures prevalent in our two systems are quite distinct. During a separate trip to the States a couple of years ago I attended a high school football game and witnessed openness and self-assuredness in the most positive way - there was not a shred of inhibition evident from the football players, the supporters or the homecoming parade participants. All the young people were fully engaged and purposeful, clad in team colours and cheering whole-heartedly. Football and writing may be fairly disparate endeavours but there is something to be said for the ethos of confidence and keenness to participate that is very much part of an American student's school experience. When I applied for the scholarship, I was particularly keen to get a sense of *how* this ethos was cultivated in schools.

In 2016, I was been lucky to get a glimpse into the incredible impact that writing workshops can have on young people. I applied for and was awarded a fully-funded writer-in-residence programme through the wonderful Scottish Book Trust. The focus of the year-long project was to increase our senior pupils' confidence in finding their own voice and expressing their identity on paper. My (quieter) aim throughout the experience was for this group of apprehensive sixteen-year olds to realise that they are all writers - all they had to do is write! The programme ran for a full year with author Helen MacKinnen and the difference in the young people was overwhelming. They produced beautiful, thoughtful pieces of literature and shared these at a celebratory event in a local library. I recently interviewed one of the pupils involved in the project, who said the experience was, "uplifting after pushing myself out of my comfort zone. Sharing my writing brought me closer to the community around me and raised my self-confidence."

Early in 2019, I had the opportunity to conduct a Practitioner Enquiry in conjunction with Fife Council, gaining recognition from the General Teaching Council of Scotland. I was able to trial my project within a smaller context, using only what I had read, which was an invaluable starting point for this larger-scale project that would involve first-hand, in-person research.

Talking about writing: improving confidence, literacy and oracy skills in a creative writing workshop setting

Laura Barbour, English Teacher, Dunfermline High School (laura.barbour@fife.gov.uk)

Background to project:

Pupils' confidence, literacy and oracy skills must be significantly improved in line with the national priority of raising attainment for all. Pupils, as a whole, enjoy creative writing but are often apathetic or even horrified at the idea of workshoping and sharing their writing. My research focused on pedagogical approaches used in the USA, where Creative Writing is a valued and successful part of the English curriculum. I proposed to explore:

- the practicalities of creating a 'safe space' where pupils can share their own work and provide feedback on others' writing
- how pupils are encouraged to articulate their thoughts (in writing and in spoken language) without inhibition
- the impact on confidence when pupils are given ownership of their writing and receive feedback from a small audience.

Research Methods

Professional reading and dialogue: To ensure a strong foundation for my project, I based my project on findings from the most recent Scottish Survey of Literacy which highlights a clear performance gap in standards of talking and writing between P7 and S2. Additionally, I undertook extensive professional reading of articles/books published by US English teachers and other professionals. I have also made (and sustained) contact with several US teachers, writers and writing organisations for whom creative writing workshops is a speciality. With them, I have engaged in professional dialogue via email.

Pre-project pupil questionnaire: Pupils were asked to reflect on twenty questions about talking and writing, answering fully and honestly, in order for me to gauge their perceptions.

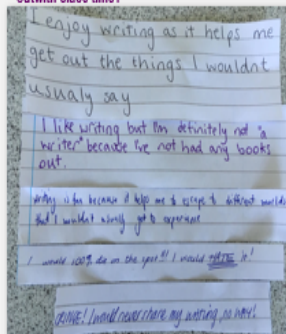
S2 focus group: I chose my low-ability S2 class of 20 pupils for two reasons: Firstly, they are the class I know best after teaching most of the pupils since the start of S1. Secondly, pupils in Scotland are assessed by the Scottish Survey of Literacy for the last time in S2 and this is where standards drop in talking and writing, therefore the need for improvement at this level is clear.

Holistic assessment of success: As I know the class well, I was confident about being able to determine, holistically, how their literacy and oracy skills improved. It would also be possible to gain an overall

Initial findings:

The following is a range of sample questions from the questionnaire given to the S2 class:

- Do you enjoy writing? Why/why not?
- Do you think of yourself as a writer? Why/why not?
- What do you think are the benefits of creative writing?
- How do you feel about sharing your writing in front of the class?
- What might put you off sharing your writing?
- What do you think are the benefits of sharing your written work?
- What does success mean to you when it comes to writing?
- Would you ever attend a writing workshop outwith class time?



Above: Sample responses to initial questionnaire from S2 focus group.

Results indicated that the majority of pupils surveyed (75%) enjoy writing or are ambivalent towards it. However, only 10% of pupils identified as a writer. They also mostly enjoy receiving feedback on their writing from their close friends (75%), with all (100%) indicating that they like receiving feedback from their teacher. Almost half the pupils surveyed (45%) indicated that they would either consider attending a creative writing workshop, with some indicating that they would love this opportunity. However, almost all of the pupils surveyed (80%) responded negatively to the idea of sharing their writing orally, or talking about the writing process. Some even asserted

Approach:

Pupils would spend a period of two weeks in a creative writing workshop setting. Practically, this would follow the US approach of creating a sense of equality and collaboration by having all participants (including the teacher) sitting around one table. It also creates a degree of gravitas which, in itself, emphasises the serious nature of the project.

Also important to the nature of the research is the fact that the teacher should never be the person to speak first when responding to a piece of work. This moves away from teacher-led learning and pupils are empowered as their autonomy grows.

When feeding back, a student must address the work, not the writer. This encourages the serious consideration of writing skills and how to improve them.

It is vital that the teacher write with the pupils, so I would also submit my own writing for consideration. This would help to exemplify the writing and editing process, show a willingness to experiment and emphasise that the first draft of anything will never be 'Jane Eyre'!

Outcomes:

Overall, pupils responded positively to - and enjoyed - the two-week project. All pupils were engaged in the writing tasks and took them seriously. Not all pupils were comfortable sharing their own work or felt able to offer feedback/advice on others' work. Writing with the pupils and offering my own work for feedback definitely helped to create a safe space and sense of equality.

Areas to consider:

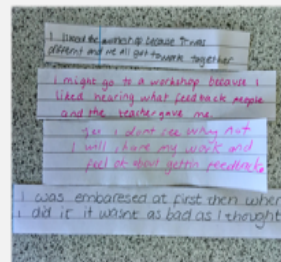
I believe the impact on pupils' literacy skills would be the most immediate and significant due to pupils' natural propensity for writing.

Pupils need to be clearly equipped with strategies for effective talking skills before beginning any workshoping. They must be equipped with the language/vocabulary needed to effectively critique and comment on writing. This needs to be done by having a clear focus for each session, e.g. how tension is created through sentence structure.

Due to the nature of the class and the physical set-up of being around a table, there was some talking over each other when feeding back. There was also the tendency for 'mini groups' to attempt to break off and engage in their own discussions. Perhaps some kind of 'talking toy' would help to prevent this.

I mostly found that pupils were not able to begin responding orally to writing without my prompting. They would need more time to begin to take ownership of the workshoping process.

It became clear that workshoping must become more embedded in my classroom practice to see real results. The more confident pupils in the class were happy to share their work but the quieter pupils remained reticent and unwilling to do this. Time and consistency of approach would mean



Above: A range of sample pupil responses to post-project questionnaire.

86% of pupils responded positively to the writing workshop setting. There was no change in the percentage of pupils who identified as writers (10%) and I think it would take more time (as well as celebration of success) to change this perception. 100% of pupils surveyed responded positively to the teacher's involvement as an equal so this is obviously a valuable part of the process. There was a slight increase in the number of pupils who would consider attending a workshop outside class time - 66% instead of 46% previously. Perhaps most significant is the difference in the responses to pupils sharing their writing. Previously, 30% felt that sharing their own writing would be undesirable or totally out of the question. Now, 46% of pupils either had shared their work or felt that they may be able to. When asked how they would feel about this, responses ranged from 'fine' to 'embarrassed but proud'. To have this kind of result in such a short time demonstrates the strong potential for workshoping to increase pupil confidence.

Next steps:

As time was the biggest limiting factor in to my project, it is essential that I continue to implement workshoping as a regular activity. Embedding creative writing workshops into the English curriculum, and making effective use of the weekly Creative Writing elective course, will also ensure continuing success.

Hood, C. (2014) emphasises the importance of having a dedicated safe writing space. There is the possibility of making use of a small space within my school to establish this for use in or outwith class time. Hood also asserts that celebration of success is vital. Organising a formal celebratory event or publication of sorts would provide incentive, a sense of purpose and add a further element of enjoyment to writing.

References

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Methodology

Firstly, the range of individuals, schools and organisations that form the findings of my research will ensure a breadth of response. The teachers I spoke with and the schools I visited were located in two different states and three different school districts. One school was located in the top 2.8% of schools in the United States, and one had recently undergone state intervention for low performance in testing. I interviewed teachers, poets, publishers, charity workers and school students to ensure thoroughness and avoid a narrow perspective. The students I observed and worked with in schools were

8th graders, 10th graders and 11th graders. The two writing organisations I visited had teenagers of all ages being tutored and mentored but one also involved a workshop with 4th graders (9 years old).

Fittingly, as my project focuses on ensuring pupil voice, the quantitative element of my research involves a survey given to a random selection of American students. The same survey was given to a random selection of my own pupils. The following questions were asked of every participant (with the exception of question 10, which was not asked of Scottish pupils.)

1. Do you enjoy writing? Why/why not?
2. Do you think of yourself as a writer? Why/why not?
3. If you had total freedom, what would you choose to write about?
4. What do you think are the benefits of creative writing?
5. How do you feel about sharing what you have written with:
 - a) a friend or two
 - b) your teacher
 - c) the rest of the class
 - d) a public audience?
6. What might put you off sharing your writing?
7. How do you feel about hearing your peers share their writing?
8. How would you feel about your teacher sharing their writing with you?
9. What do you think are the benefits of sharing your written work?
10. If you could give any advice about writing to a Scottish student, what would you tell them?

Lastly, because of the fast-paced nature of my trip (combined with extended periods of driving) I was determined to dedicate time to capture the details of each stop, so established a blog, [America the Braw](#), as a dedicated space to record and reflect upon my journey. Blogging 'live' was invaluable as it allowed me to maintain a clear record of my activities and also begin to explore, in writing, my own response to what I was seeing. Moreover, I was able to instantly share the 'raw' account of my experiences online and promote my research via Twitter and other social media, which has led to various individuals and organisations getting in touch wishing to further discuss my work.

Results

- **Olean High School, Olean, New York**

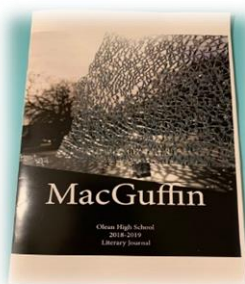
After flying in to Boston Logan International Airport late on a Saturday night, I spent my first morning in the States - a sunny Sunday - exploring the beautiful college town of Amherst, Massachusetts. Emily Dickinson was born and lived here; I loved getting to see her home and her alma mater, Amherst College. Amherst is also home to a quaint little book shop that has a vending machine that dispenses poems for 50 cents a piece!

I then drove the 7 hour journey to Olean, New York where Sally Ventura and her family were kind enough to host me for the night. I had contacted Sally some months ago after finding an article she wrote in *Teachers and Writers Magazine* that discusses the importance of creating a sense of identity in young people by explicitly referring to them as writers and as readers in the classroom.

<https://teachersandwritersmagazine.org/english-language-artists-5828.htm>

Sally is the Faculty Chair of English Language Arts at Olean High School and currently teaches 11th grade. Built in the 1930s, Olean High is the personification of my ideas about American schools - lockers line the corridors, the gymnasium was in full flow with volleyball practice and students begin the day by standing and pledging allegiance to the flag. The school's Principal, Mr Andreano, was kind enough to meet me and take me on a walking tour of the whole building, introducing me to numerous teachers. In a non-contact period (or "prep time") Sally and I took a drive around Olean. Just like at home, there is a diversity to the town's economy that includes many low-income households. I felt somewhat ignorant when I learned that a 'regular town' like Olean had a number of Projects (or Low Income Apartment Communities) as that's something I had only ever heard of in relation to places like the Bronx. I didn't really have a sense of what a Project looked like but commented at the time that the buildings look quite similar to my own house! Back in school, I met with the District Superintendent, Mr Moore, who oversees a number of schools in the area. Within a minute of meeting, we had decided to further the connection between our two schools by investigating the potential for an exchange programme.

Spending time in Sally's classes was the highlight of my day. Olean students were so open and welcoming, asking questions about Scottish schools and expressing horror at the idea of wearing uniform! My perception of writing as part of the English Language Arts curriculum is that it can be very much geared towards preparation for state testing and, later, college. I can see how the creativity could be sucked out of the writing process. One of the ways that Sally is combatting this is through her excellent 'High Schooler's Guide to Happiness' unit, which focuses on increased agency and empowerment in her students. Incorporating elements of positive psychology and encouraging self-reflection, I loved the idea of a programme of study with writing at its core that will, undoubtedly, have an explicitly positive impact on a young person's wellbeing.



Once of the most exciting parts of visiting Olean High was that the English faculty have already implemented two of the specific things I set as aims at the outset of my research. Firstly, the school's creative writing group have professionally published an incredibly impressive literary journal, *MacGuffin*, containing poetry and photography from students. I was blown away by the quality of the content and am only bolstered in the belief that celebration of success is a crucial way to empower and encourage our young writers. Additionally, within the English faculty, a dedicated space for writing has been established in the form of the Writing and Media Center. This has become a multi-purpose hub of sorts, a place where students can spend quiet writing time during lessons or can receive some one-on-one support with a piece they are working on. I was shown some student-made films based on poems that had been created and edited on Macs in the writing center, an important reminder that there are many ways - traditional and technological - to harness literacy skills and creativity in our young people.

All of the young people I spoke to were happy to consider their perceptions of themselves as writers by completing my aforementioned questionnaires. The American students also kindly offered some writing advice to Scottish students that I look forward to sharing upon my return, such as: "Express yourself and don't hold anything back", "excite yourself by giving yourself a reason to write" and "write for yourself, write what you need to express or let go of."



- **Oswego Middle School, Oswego, New York**

In Oswego Middle School the day consists of nine periods, some of which are planning periods, but most involve the repetition of the same lesson to each different class from the same year group. This is one of the fundamental differences of our countries' school systems: an American teacher's day involves teaching a number of different classes from the same year group who are all following the same programme of study.

I was to spend two days in Dan Rose's 8th grade classroom. I came to be in touch with Dan after finding his article on the importance of students sharing their writing: <https://teachersandwritersmagazine.org/writing-isnt-over-till-we-share-4440.htm>. Dan was happy to welcome me into his classroom and I am incredibly grateful for his candour as we exchanged our views about our respective education systems over our two days together.

I was interested to hear that the state has recently intervened due to chronic absence and low testing scores and now requires all teachers at OMS to implement the principals of EDI (Explicit Direct Instruction), with a focus on APK (Activating Prior Knowledge). Part of this involves displaying explicit learning objectives at the beginning of a lesson and referring to these throughout. This is very similar to the expectations of how a lesson is delivered in Scotland, but this didn't (yet!) stretch to the inclusion of success criteria, plenaries etc. Although displaying and reading aloud learning objectives can sometimes feel somewhat tokenistic, I did appreciate that the core, focus question of the day - in this instance, "Why would a character act this way?" - was directly related to the LOs ("I can identify contrast and contradiction in a character") and that this question was referred to repeatedly. Whether it relates to a reading or writing based classroom activity, embedding critical language in a pupil's mind is key in empowering them to participate in meaningful classroom discussion. Pupils can internalise easier if they have *one* clue to keep in mind (the LO relating to contrast and contradiction) and *one* question to ask themselves when they find that clue - why would a character act this way?

Often, in my own teaching, I encounter those three little words: "I don't know...". It seems that pupils genuinely feel that they don't know what to write, don't know what to think or don't know how to articulate a thought. To combat this, Dan has visual prompts displayed whenever pupils are engaged in a reading task. These include: "The first thing I think of is...", "On the other hand...", "When I think deeper about this..." etc. It was evident that this was very successful. Students were well-versed in responding to texts in their notebooks. Even if a student didn't have a particularly perceptive thought or idea, they were all able to write something. They all had a starting point. They had all engaged. By its very nature, this kind of task enables an appropriate verbal response from young people. If a student is asked to share an idea, they can. They have *something*. Being 'forced' to think and respond as you read or listen to a text enables oracy. This is something that I will definitely implement in creative writing workshops, where students are asked to respond to their peers' work. I think I would have previously found it quite artificial to furnish pupils with scripted prompts but, actually, this is vital if oracy is to become something that is undertaken more organically. Until the natural, quality conversation flows, students build confidence by having these comment-starters as a kind of support. I am convinced, more than ever, that reading and writing go hand in hand; hearing a piece of writing is reading it with ears, with brains, with heart, because the intrinsic critical responses borne out of close reading also apply to responding to a piece of writing that is heard.

The most exciting thing about my visit to Oswego was that Dan was kind enough to allow me to borrow his classes for the day and deliver lessons on *The Outsiders*. Talk about an authentic New York teaching experience! I couldn't resist adding a Scottish flavour to each lesson though - I had brought copies of the Scottish Book Trust's recent short story collection, *Blether*, and I presented my very own book talk to Dan's 8th graders! I shared Chris McQueer's short story, *Blether*, and loved explaining Scots words such as "glaikit", "fitbaw" and "burd" as we discussed the universal nature of literature, whether it be Ponyboy being attacked by the Socs, or Glaswegian men slagging each other off in a pub! (<https://www.scottishbooktrust.com/book-week-scotland/read-blether>)

students are responsible for caring for! There is a liberality and inclusivity to the way the school operates: restrooms are for all genders and the students I spoke to were keen to tell me about their self-led activism. The school has fewer than 400 students and there is a real 'family' feel around the building. There is a relaxed (but not lackadaisical) atmosphere and most students address their teachers, including the Principal, by their first name. I was lucky enough to be taken on a tour and witnessed students with free time curled up in the armchairs that are dotted around, talking and studying.

Kerrin's maximum class size is 25 but a typical class has around 19 students in it. My own classes - and my colleagues' - average at around 30 pupils, with some reaching the legal maximum of 33. It goes without saying that this poses challenges in many ways but one that particularly frustrates is the difficulty in creating a writing environment that is cosy and low-key. Kerrin's classroom is set out with the desks in one large square, with all students looking in. She also sits with students at the desk. Creating an environment of equality and solidarity is a key factor in establishing what Kerrin feels her classes are - "communities of writers." She believes, in no uncertain terms, that the best way to create such an ethos is by regularly sharing her own work as a poet. She will ask for her students' advice, share her struggles and lay herself bare in the most authentic way. Something I loved is that Kerrin addresses the feelings associated with the idea of sharing one's work. She leads a discussion about the body and everyone takes time to identify and articulate the physicality associated with nervousness or fear, thus taking a kind of ownership and control over the process. They have an awareness of how they feel and why, plus they know that most of their audience is in the same boat. I think it's an incredibly empowering concept to have that knowledge and then to go for it, despite the way your pesky body insists on feeling. Feel the fear and do it anyway, as they say.

The clear connection between academic success and emotional wellbeing was again evident to me in a moment I found really touching. On account of my visit, one of the sophomore classes was enthusiastic about 'checking in' to begin the lesson. Simply, everyone introduced themselves, stated what their favourite cereal was and said how they were feeling today. Perhaps this doesn't sound like much but after bonding over Lucky Charms and Cap'n Crunch, every single person in the room had identified, articulated and let others know *how they were feeling*. What a simple thing to do, but what a starting point for any lesson, especially if that lesson then called for a writing activity, which also involves externalising the internal. Now, because it's America, the land of innate good cheer and home of the optimist, the most negative comment in the room was "doing pretty good...". I am under no illusion that this would ever be the case in a classroom crammed with crabbit Scots!

Speaking of misery, something that seems to elicit unanimous groans in the States is the dreaded 'five paragraph essay'. In other words, the prescriptive, restrictive structure that the majority of academic writing must adhere to, in line with state testing standards. Students brought this up as a bugbear and passionately told me that writing should be individualised and experimental, it should be about what you love and it should be relaxing. They feel the balance is tipped very much in favour of analytical writing in the curriculum and that this stifles their creativity.

Some of the Montpelier students filled out my aforementioned questionnaire that I have also given to my own pupils. Below are some sample responses:

What do you think the benefits of creative writing are? *"The benefit that I appreciate the most is the creative outlet to process my life."* (Auden, age 17)

How would you feel about your teacher sharing their writing with you? *"I really enjoy it. It makes them vulnerable."* (Isaac, age 17)

What one word sums up your school? *"Community-centred."* (Piper, age 15)

Additionally, I had the privilege of conducting a one-on-one interview with one of Kerrin's creative writing students. Talking with seventeen-year-old Shyloh was one of the highlights of my day. Below is a transcription of my interview with her.

1. Do you enjoy writing? Why/why not? *Sometimes I really don't and it drives me a little crazy because I have a really high expectation of myself. But I can't not do it. I love writing and sometimes the things you love aren't always exciting.*

2. Do you think of yourself as a writer? Why/why not? *I guess that I do... It's hard to proclaim myself as something! I'm constantly discovering new ways of writing and I guess it is part of who I am.*

3. If you had total freedom, what would you choose to write about? *Things I observe. I always think we should cross some boundary in writing, so there should be some kind of restriction on myself so that I can push past that.*

4. What do you think the benefits of creative writing are? *It's really a way to memorialise your thoughts and leave a mark. We observe things other people don't think about. It's a way to connect with others through your inner musings. Writing is an art, even if it's a boring essay!*

5. How do you feel about sharing what you have written with:

a) a friend or two *I mean, if someone asked... yeah, sure.*

b) your teacher *I usually do and I'm comfortable with it.*

c) the rest of the class *it depends on the topic. If it was a smaller class then there's a closeness and comfort. Otherwise it might be a struggle.*

d) a public audience? *I actually have been pushing myself to give public readings. I've also been published in the local papers and the Young Writers Project* has published me on their blog and anthology. Reading aloud and speaking your words aloud is so interesting because you're thinking as you're reading. Often your thinking changes and the meaning of your work can even change in that moment.*

6. What might put you off sharing your writing? *If people seem uninterested or there's a lack of care. Or if I don't think my work is good. Especially in a large class it can get a bit lost in the crowd and there can be more of a variation in attitude when there are more*

people. So, I actually prefer reading in a public space than a classroom because then people are there by choice!

7. How do you feel about hearing your peers share their writing? *You can learn a lot from that but sometimes it is hard if something is overly emotional or is just bad writing. Everybody writes bad things and it can definitely be a bit 'cringe'! Despite that, you can still find good parts to comment on and offer some constructive criticism. Mostly, students are respectful of each other's work because there is a shared scariness and vulnerability.*

8. How would you feel about your teacher sharing their writing with you? *When they have shared their work we connect as writer to writer rather than teacher to student and can share the process and our struggles.*

9. What do you think are the benefits of sharing your written work? *Different perspectives. Work is always unfinished until someone reads it. There is the writer's half and the reader's half.*

10. If you could give any advice about writing to a Scottish student, what would you tell them? *Even if everything in your head tells you to be scared... just go for it. The only limit to your writing is what your mind places on it, and you can choose to go beyond that. Writing is about pushing yourself. Think about the writing itself as a living thing. What does that writing deserve? It's not always about you! What are you going to give to that piece of writing? How are you going to give this art something beautiful?*

*Vermont's Young Writers Project is one of many ways that students at Montpelier High can develop their identities as writers outside of the classroom. A community of writers, artists and mentors, the YWP holds workshops and events as well as celebrating young voices in publication. Their 'Weekly Challenges' page has some excellent creative writing prompts that I will be using in my classroom. (<https://youngwritersproject.org/about>)

Further opportunities for Montpelier's young writers come in the form of an after-school writing group and also in 'real' writing events. Kerrin told me about an upcoming poetry evening she is reading at where she has invited three of her students (including Shyloh) to publicly read alongside her. I am struck by the genuine and authentic connections Kerrin creates both in and out of her classroom. It's no wonder her students could not have spoken more highly of her.

Much like the focus on pupil empowerment and voice back home, Montpelier High advocates for student-based learning. Their school motto, All Means All, encourages variation, personalisation and, pleasingly, a little bit of rebellion! To illustrate: in addition to the standard curricular opportunities available, MHS offers Independent Study, Community Based Learning (where students undertake work placements in an area of their choosing) as well as online learning programmes. There is also an affiliation with the local university, UVM, where students can serve their senior year in college rather than school. Ultimately, this all boils down to flexibility, a quality that features strongly in Kerrin's classroom. Because MHS follows the Proficiency Based Learning system (<https://www.greatschoolspartnership.org/proficiency-based-learning/about-pbl->

[simplified/framework-for-proficiency-based-learning-how-it-works](#)), students need to demonstrate their proficiency in certain skills and can be afforded a degree of flexibility about how they do so. If, for example, the skill being assessed is organising a piece of extended writing, the student may elect not to write a critical essay on *The Book Thief* but on - and these are real life examples - 'The (Lack of) Evolution of Taylor Swift' or 'Rape Culture in Downton Abbey'. This is particularly effective when it comes to challenging the most able students. Kerrin and I were both in agreement that, so often, the interventions, or "safety nets", put in place for students are geared towards low attainment and that it is difficult to always ensure appropriate challenge is available for our most able students.

All in all, the word that kept coming up at Montpelier High was "community". Although I work in a school with four times the number of pupils and, sometimes, double the class sizes, I am determined to find ways to foster a culture that is community-based, where I am a writer along with my pupils and where I am flexible and allow my pupils to personalise their learning.

One of the great joys of my conversations with young Americans is their fascination with Scotland, Scottish food, school uniform, my weird accent... and so I found myself expounding the delights of Irn Bru, haggis, a chippy, anything deep-fried... On the other side of the coin, apparently I haven't lived until I've had mac 'n' Cheetos. I received a charitable round of applause as I showcased my best American accent and I laughed so hard listening to the student's valiant attempts at "loch" and "dreich".



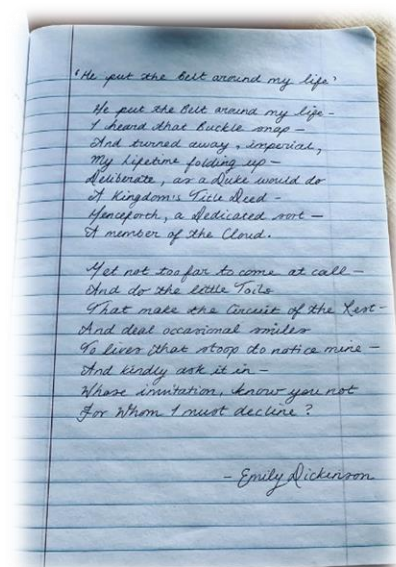
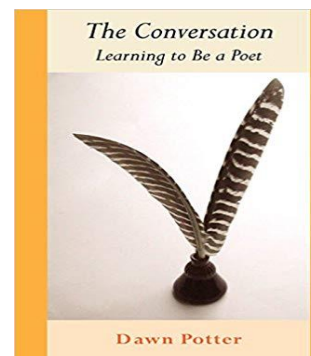
To top off a glorious day, Kerrin invited me to attend her son, Cal's, high school basketball game that evening. As if that wasn't enough excitement for one evening, Kerrin and her husband Cliff took me out for a night on the town! Al's French Frys is a South Burlington institution and a classic American diner in every way. I have now experienced the best strawberry milkshake ever and discovered the legendary \$2 cheeseburgers. After a quick tour of Burlington we headed to an arcade that specialises in local beer. We had fun amidst a bar full of college students, playing pinball and Tetris. What a Friday. I cannot thank Kerrin and Cliff enough for their excellent hosting skills and can't wait to repay the kindness when they visit me in Scotland!

- **Dawn Potter, Portland, Maine**

Dawn Potter is a widely-published writer of poetry and prose, who directs the Frost Place Conference on Poetry and Teaching, held each summer at Robert Frost's home in

Franconia, New Hampshire. She also runs writing workshops for rural Maine teenagers at Monson Arts, a writers' and artists' residency and centre for the arts. I had the privilege of visiting Dawn at her home in Portland, Maine to interview her.

Like me, Dawn is an advocate for empowering young people by harnessing their "wildness" and also ensuring their local dialect and geographic identity is present in their writer's voice. Dawn currently works with a group of teenagers who are bussed into Monson Arts from rural, Northeastern Maine which, as she explained, is not a privileged area and can be quite an isolating place to live. The young people she is working with come from a range of schools and are a mixed group in terms of age, gender and enthusiasm. Nonetheless, the group have bonded and grown in confidence, something Dawn attributes, in part, to the centre itself. She firmly believes that even the best creative writing happening in a classroom is still happening 'for school'. Having a separate, dedicated writing space that is both purposeful and safe is clearly having a significant impact on the young people in the programme.



A particular activity Dawn spoke of that piqued my interest is having students copy out a poem as it is slowly read aloud to them, punctuation and line breaks included. Now, "copy" is often considered meritless rote in the teaching profession, so I admit I was sceptical at first. Dawn has her students write out a poem in order for them to borrow the poet's identity before asking them to create their own. In her book, *The Conversation: Learning to be a Poet*, she writes about how, by doing this, "we come as close as we ever will to living inside another mind as it actively creates a poem." My scepticism lessened as she explained the visual power a poem has. By carefully considering and discussing the line structure and punctuation, a student is given first-hand experience of constructing a piece of writing from start to finish. That evening I gave it a go myself. As well as taking care with neatness and handwriting, I found that, by the end of copying out the poem, my mind had hardly reached the

point where I afforded any meaning to the lines. Rather, my focus had been almost entirely on the accuracy of the line placement, odd capitalisation and punctuation. I'm now convinced that I love the approach of separating the meaning of a poem from the visual accuracy.

This 'borrowing' approach also applies when it comes to the even harder part - getting pupils to share their writing. Dawn does performance training with her students, but all the coaching and practice is done with a famous poem first, so that the fear of sharing one's own work doesn't come into play until they are furnished with strategies to deal with their nerves. For the second time this trip, yoga was mentioned! Dawn plans to have students take part in some basic yoga practices (breathing and posture rather than downward dog!) The relationship between mind and body is absolutely something I intend to consider more explicitly in my own teaching strategies. I am incredibly grateful to Dawn for her time and hospitality.

- The Telling Room, Portland, Maine



lighthouse; it was absolutely beautiful.

Although the primary purpose of my visit to Portland was to spend the day as The Telling Room, I also relished the opportunity to sample some local cuisine, in the form of a lobster and donuts made from potatoes! I'm glad I tried lobster (and gladder still that it came with an instruction leaflet) but it was definitely a one-off experience. I also had some time to drive out to Portland Head Light, Portland's oldest operating



The Telling Room is a gorgeous space situated in the Old Port region of downtown Portland. Established in 2004, the non-profit organisation's aim is to empower and build confidence in young people as they find their voices and identities as writers. To do this, they run a number of incredible programmes including Young Writers and Leaders, a nine-month-long writing and leadership programme for refugee, first generation, and immigrant high schoolers. (There is a large, growing population of

Central African refugees in Portland.) The Telling Room also offers the Young Emerging Authors programme, where a small group of fellows are selected (through a rigorous application process) to write, edit and publish a book within a year. Everything they offer is free of charge to participants. Their philosophy includes trying to ensure they hear every student's voice, every day. They very much believe in recognising and celebrating the small successes along the way in the writing process, as well as with their incredibly impressive publishing programme. Moreover, fun factors highly in the Telling Room's approach: there is minimal front-of-house, didactic instruction but, in a typical session, games and activities go hand in hand with focused writing time.

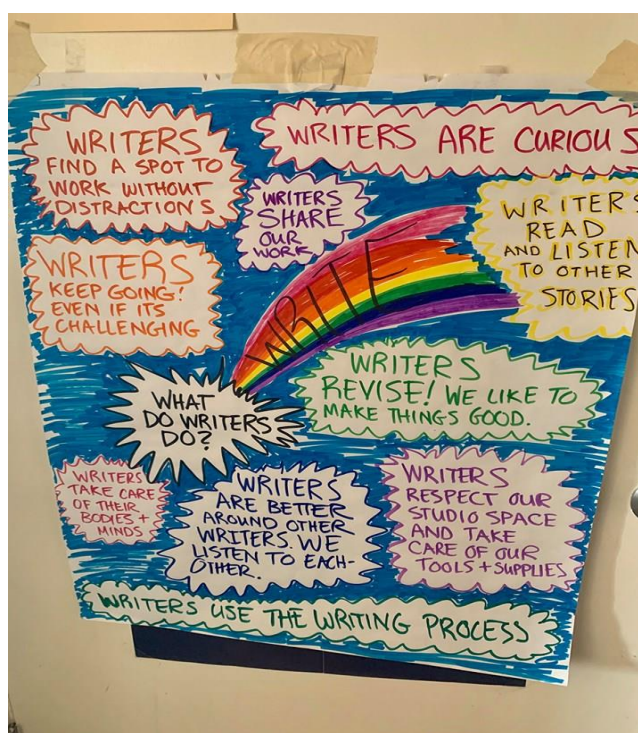
When I arrived on Tuesday morning, I met with Programme Director Nick Whiston, who had kindly arranged my visit. Nick is realistic about the fact that schools' budgets are often not kind to the Arts and, as a result, opportunity for creative expression in schools can be limited. As with other teaching professionals I have met, Nick feels that the *No Child Left Behind Act* - and, latterly, *Every Student Succeeds* - is noble in its intention but is problematic in that it pushes for teachers to achieve academic targets at the expense of a child's social and emotional development. Additionally, in teacher training, little time is afforded to instruction in the ways of teaching writing. Further, in the school curriculum, writing doesn't always seem to be prioritised. For example, Nick told me that an elementary school teacher has only three twenty-minute blocks per week dedicated to

teaching writing skills. In the Telling Room, Nick acknowledges that they have the luxury of space and one-to-one mentorship that allows young people to "get their voice out and be listened to." He believes in the need to cultivate confidence in *young* children by creating a supported environment where it is safe to experiment and mess up. Nick feels that when this support "is reinforced and reinforced and reinforced" in a young person, "they can carry that on forever".

I had the privilege of joining the morning staff meeting, which wasn't too dissimilar to my own departmental meetings in school, other than the business side of things. In the meeting, the upcoming, annual Show and Tell fundraiser was discussed. If I am to implement some of my ideas back home, fundraising will be vital, so I enjoyed hearing about the ticketed evening, where an MC hosts and there are performances as well as a silent auction. There are also plans to expand the current Writers Block programme further, training new Teaching Artists and delivering sessions further off-site, whilst still providing them free of charge. My favourite moment of the meeting was that there was time scheduled on the agenda for a personal check-in, to share any news with colleagues. Clearly, voice is important to all at the Telling Room.

In the afternoon, I spent a joyous hour with Director of Publications, Molly McGrath and four brilliant young writers - Emma, Alexa, Devon and Nina - who are partway through the Young Emerging Authors programme. They are currently readying their work for editing and publication and, based on the snippets I was treated to, I cannot wait to read their finished books. One of the girls mentioned how scared she was when the programme began, but now "the nerves are all gone." Molly led the writers through the daunting task of writing their book's blurb. I soaked up her expertise along with the girls! (A good blurb should evoke a vivid sense of story and have some kind of emotional tug. It should mimic the style of writing within and should exist in harmony with what the book conveys through the title and cover.) The girls will be given ownership over their publications by being involved in the entire process, right down to whether the book's pages should be cream or white! As one of my own goals is to create some kind of publication to celebrate my pupils' writing, I was inspired to ensure the writers themselves are as much involved in the publication process as possible.

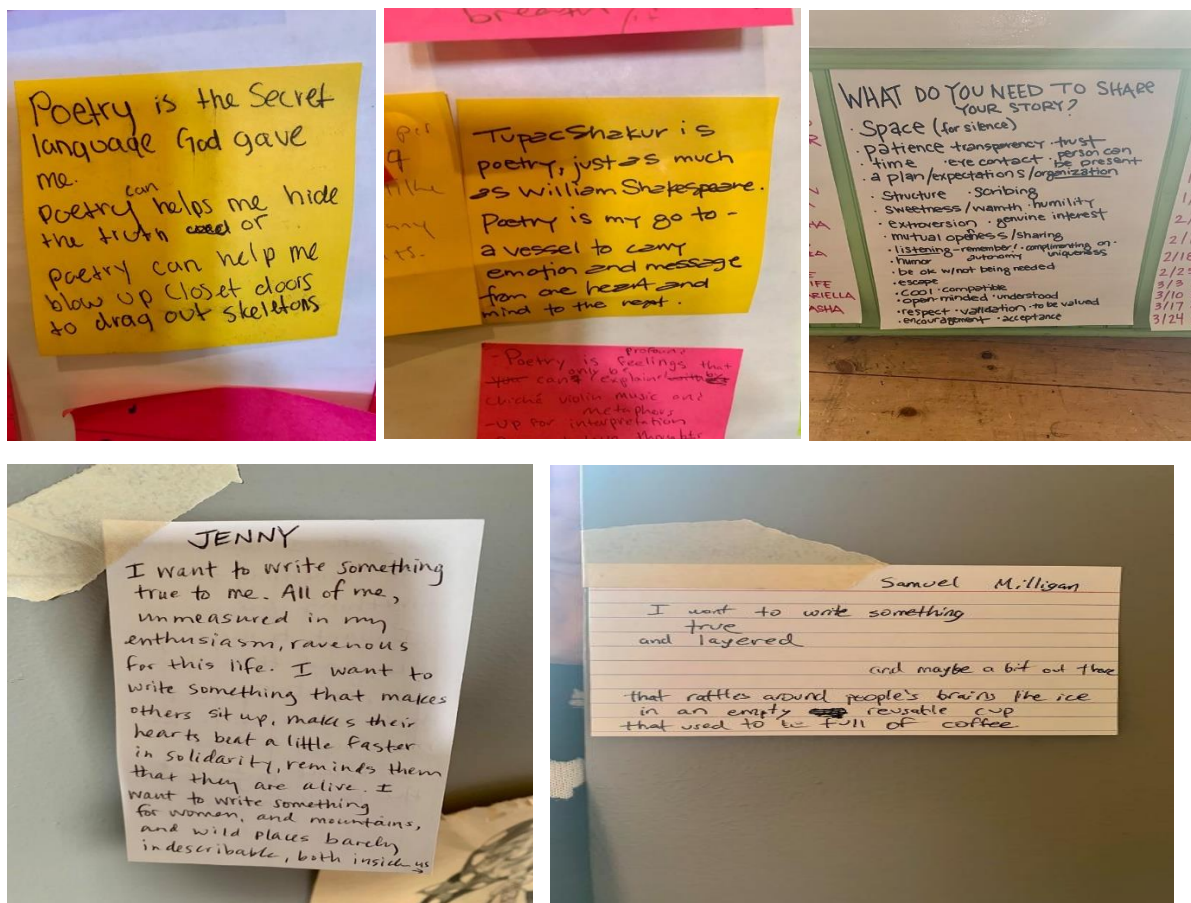




My day ended on a high with the Young Writers and Leaders programme, where 15 young writers arrived to work on projects with older mentors. The session began with everyone gathering in a circle and sharing their name with the group, breaking down the sounds and syllables to ensure everyone could pronounce it. The rest of the circle then repeated the person's name back to them. This ensures that no one has to accept a mispronunciation of their name, just because it may be unfamiliar to others. According to Lead Teaching Artist, Marjolaine Whittlesey, the Telling Room always uses a circle because everyone is completely equal; it is a leveller. When the goal is to have a student share their work, it is important to have them share themselves first. Within the first few moments of the session, everyone's voice has been heard and everyone has connected with others. Marjolaine asserted that this was a "low-barrier" activity that everyone can "buy into" before said barrier is incrementally increased and students can begin to, for example, share a sentence they have written with the group. She acknowledges that sometimes

young people will not be willing or able to share anything in a session but the thing they need is to be in a safe space.

The beauty of this week's workshop was that each student verbally explored story options while their mentors took notes. Marjolaine spoke with me about the importance of celebrating a young person's personal narrative, particularly when they are, at first, unable to see the value in what they have to share. For example, someone from rural Maine could fascinate with stories about snowmobiles, something they may take for granted but which could transport their readers and listeners to an unknown world! Oral storytelling is a powerful medium and I loved that the entire session allowed for ideas, feelings and memories to be articulated and teased out before even planning to commit them to paper. Clearly, there are a number of ways that talking and writing can go hand in hand in a workshop setting.



- 826 Boston, Boston, Massachusetts

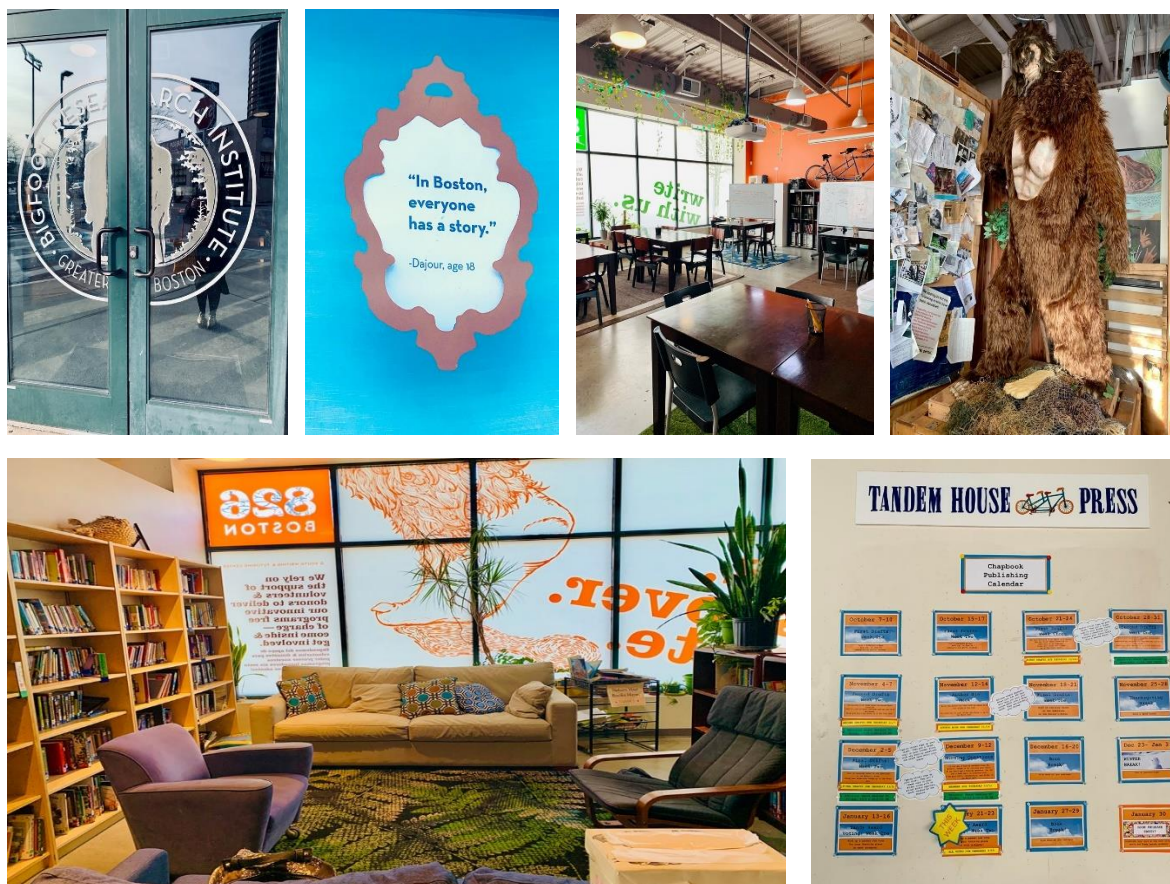
On my drive south from Portland to Boston, I took a detour to Derry, New Hampshire, to the site of American poet Robert Frost's farm. The home itself is closed for the season but the grounds are open and I spent some time exploring and enjoying Frost's poems which are displayed around the grounds. I've loved Frost since my university days so it was a very special experience to have before arriving in my final destination, Boston.

826 Boston is a non-profit youth writing and publishing organisation that works with underserved youth in the Boston area. Founded by author Dave Eggers and award-winning educator Nínive Calegari, there are a number of centres (dubbed 'Chapters') across the USA. Each Chapter has a quirky storefront as a sort of signature. (For example: a time travel mart, a superhero supply store and a magic supply store.) 826 Boston creates an intriguing first impression with their very official-looking 'Greater Boston Bigfoot Research Institute' facade.

Thanks to Carolyn Navikonis, Director of Programs and Community Engagement, I was able to spend the day soaking up the 826 magic. The first order of business was a 4th grade field trip. The students from Curtis Guild Elementary School were visiting to plan, write, edit and publish their very own book. All within two hours. It is one of the most impressive and heart-warming things I have ever witnessed! When the class arrived, they were given a welcome talk in the Bigfoot research store, which includes a model of Bigfoot, a pet tarantula and an array of cryptozoology equipment. They were then led into the main centre, where I was waiting with my fellow volunteers, all clad in official lab coats. I was given the task of taking each student's author photograph that would be printed on the back cover of their book. Then the class all gathered to begin brainstorming and writing their book, which ultimately involved Harvey Joseph the cat - who has watermelons in place of legs - travelling to a distant planet in his rocket ship. Whilst the students were given some guidelines to follow (e.g. we must have a beginning, middle and end, we must have characters, setting etc.) they ultimately had complete creative freedom to be wild, to be silly, to be funny... and they absolutely loved it. They were barely able to contain themselves as they contributed ideas.

There was also an illustrator involved, working live to create a design for the book in front of the students. Whilst the students worked, they were interrupted intermittently by Skype calls from the grumpy and hard-to-please 'publisher', demanding that they ensure the 12-noon deadline was met. Every one of the 31 ten year olds in the room was mesmerised and 'bought in' to the project, thanks in part, I'm sure, to the energetic and enthusiastic encouragement from the 826 staff and volunteers. There was something really magical about seeing the uninhibited joy and keenness amongst the students, then the pride they took in having a personal copy of their finished book to take home, thanks to a production line of volunteers and the centre's \$5000 book binding machine!

As they trotted out through a line-up of high fives and applause from us, full of pride and buoyancy, I couldn't help but think of these 4th graders' futures as teenagers. It seemed sad to think that at twelve, thirteen, fourteen... many of them will inevitably become self-conscious, inhibited and full of the awkwardness and tribulation of teenage years. I couldn't help but wonder how we as teachers can preserve that youthful wonder. How can we keep them vibrating with enthusiasm when their hands are stretched skyward, desperate to offer an idea? How can we prevent the viral reticence that stops teenagers from participating for fear of judgement?



I don't know what the magical solution to counter the 'dip' in engagement and achievement amongst new high schoolers is but it can't be a bad idea to ensure there are many opportunities to develop creative freedom in the classroom. When I spoke with 826 staff Carolyn and Karen, they stressed the importance of a young person's social and emotional development in these crucial formative years. To measure the impact of the after-school tutoring programme they offer, all students complete a pre and post programme survey, which is very similar to my own questionnaire that I have been using in my research. Students are asked to rate the extent to which they agree with statements such as "I like to share my writing with others" and "I am proud of my writing." The 'before and after' element of this tracking method is obviously key here. The staff report that, although it is not an exact science, there is a mostly positive trajectory in terms of survey responses. Karen feels specifically that conversations about writing are key to a young person's social and emotional resilience. I was also interested to discuss with Karen the issue of having a young writer share their work, particularly to a public audience. (For example, 826 are having a party to launch their latest publication soon and writers will have the opportunity to read their work aloud.) I asked Karen her thoughts on getting to the stage where young people feel able to publicly perform like this. She feels quite strongly that this part of the writing process should not be forced. She asserts that there is still great power in having someone else - for example, a tutor - read your work aloud on your behalf. Hearing the words you have written spoken aloud and noting how an audience responds to them can be incredibly empowering. I have been quite fixated on the idea of public reading being a desirable end-goal in writing, but I appreciate Karen's perspective, which has given me some food for thought.

In the afternoon, I took a quick ride over to the city's Northeastern University campus, where 826's latest Writers' Rooms is situated. The organisation has partnered with local schools and now has six dedicated Writers' Rooms in the local community. Priority is given to schools where there are a high proportion of English language learners and students who come from underserved communities. These are dedicated spaces within schools that act as the all-important "third space", one of 826's core beliefs. A third space is essentially not an in-school classroom space, but also not just any old place outside of school. There is an academic undertone to the Writers' Rooms but they all have a relaxed atmosphere. For example, the space at Northeastern campus is painted orange, there are snacks, hot drinks, sofas, plants, fairy lights... It could easily be mistaken for a cosy little coffee shop. The students of Edward M. Kennedy Academy for Health Careers, a local school, come to the space to work on specific class projects. When I visited, a group of 11th and 12th graders were preparing projects for a Science and Innovation fair. I loved talking to the students, who were welcoming, super polite and had independently come up with unique projects. To illustrate: How many rubber bands does it take to explode a watermelon? (To the students' disappointment, the answer was an underwhelming 42!)

It was fascinating to see a Science class using the Writers' Centre. In order to prepare for the fair, they had to have carefully considered what they were writing, how they were writing it and how it was presented. They had to be able to explain their projects using academic but clear language. Additionally, they have to be comfortable with what they had written to ensure they are able to answer questions that come up or provide further clarity. The giant display boards they were creating were in progress and looking brilliant. Seeing meaningful writing and creativity in progress for Science class got me thinking about all the different ways a dedicated writing space could be used in my own school. There is much more value to be had by considering the ways other subjects could benefit from the space too.

826 Boston is an organisation responsible for the most incredible things in their community. The environment that is created at 826 feels very special. Young people are safe, comfortable and excited. Parents and carers who popped in to drop off or collect their children clearly appreciate the warm sense of community. Confidence is growing, freedom and imagination are encouraged and incredible writing is happening.

On my final full day in America, I was able to soak up some of Boston's culture. I followed the Freedom Trail, wandered through Quincy Market and visited the fascinating Isabella Stewart Gardner museum, home to the largest art heist in history! Furthermore, I took a drive out to Concord where Louisa May Alcott's incredible childhood home - The Orchard House - remains. I was lucky enough to take a private tour and saw a number of spectacular sights, including the desk where Alcott wrote *Little Women*. The Alcotts were a remarkable family; Bronson, the father, was an English teacher who was sacked 25 times for his radical and outrageous ideas. For example, he allowed children recess, led field trips and didn't believe in a one-size-fits-all curriculum... He was finally disgraced and banned from teaching when he attempted to enrol a black student he had helped rescue from slavery into his class. The Orchard House was the perfect end to my trip.

Discussion

The 'discussion' section will be divided into the following sections:

- Presentation of sample survey findings
- Greater curricular focus on creative writing and writing workshops:
- The importance of community
- Celebrating success
- Social and emotional wellbeing
- Academic attainment

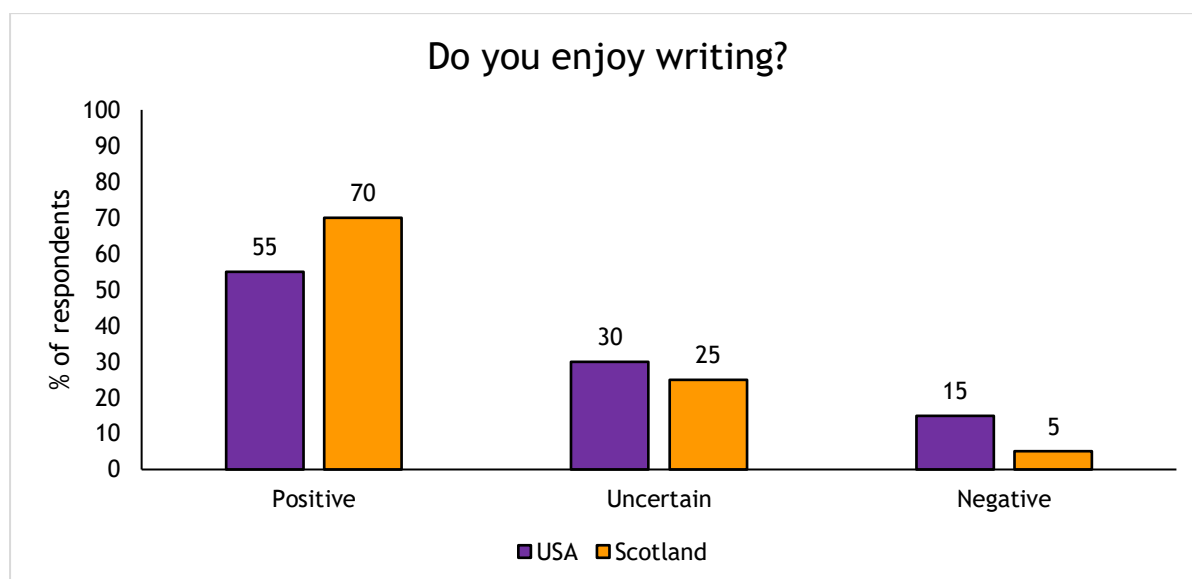
Presentation of survey findings:

In order to ascertain the extent to which differences and/or similarities exist within our two cultures, I have sampled the information provided by American and Scottish teenagers to generate quantitative data. The respective focus groups were mixed gender and consisted of 20 individuals on each side. Individuals ranged from age 12 to age 17. In my data gathering, I focused on the following questions:

1. Do you enjoy writing?
2. Do you think of yourself as a writer?
5. How do you feel about sharing what you have written with:
 - a) a friend or two
 - b) your teacher
 - c) the rest of the class
 - d) a public audience?

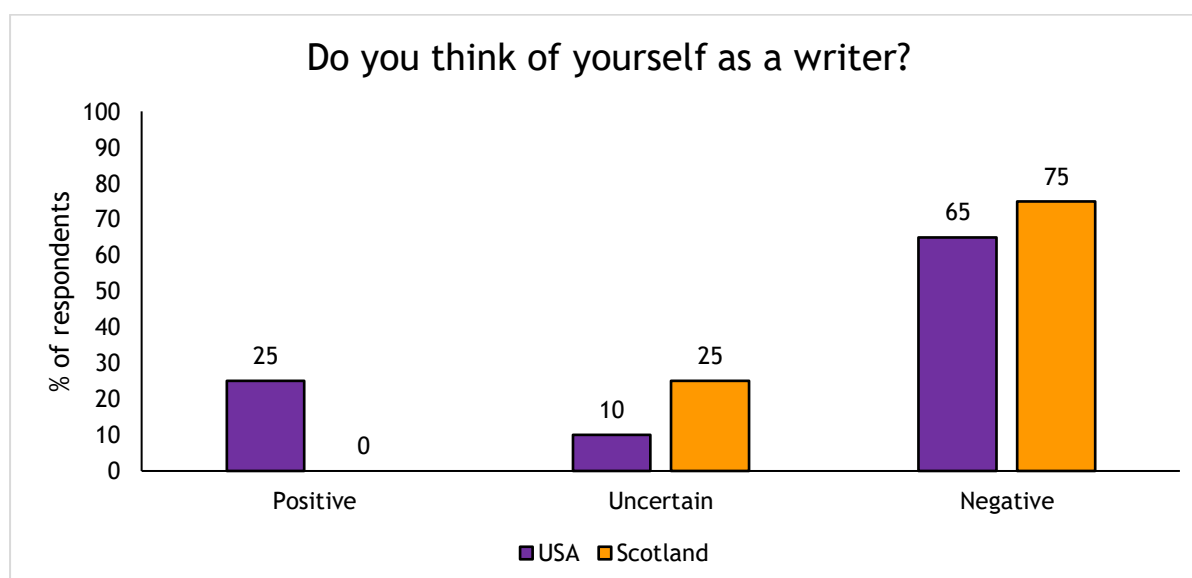
The results were as follows:

Question 1



Interestingly, 55% of American students surveyed responded positively, compared with 70% of Scottish pupils. My immediate thought was of the conversations I had held with various teachers and students, who felt the enjoyment had been somewhat removed from writing by the strong focus on testing and ‘academic’ writing. I was heartened to see that 70% of Scottish pupils had a positive response to the question, indicating that, although there is work to be done as to the perception and value of creative writing, there is evidence of a strong foundation upon which to build.

Question 2



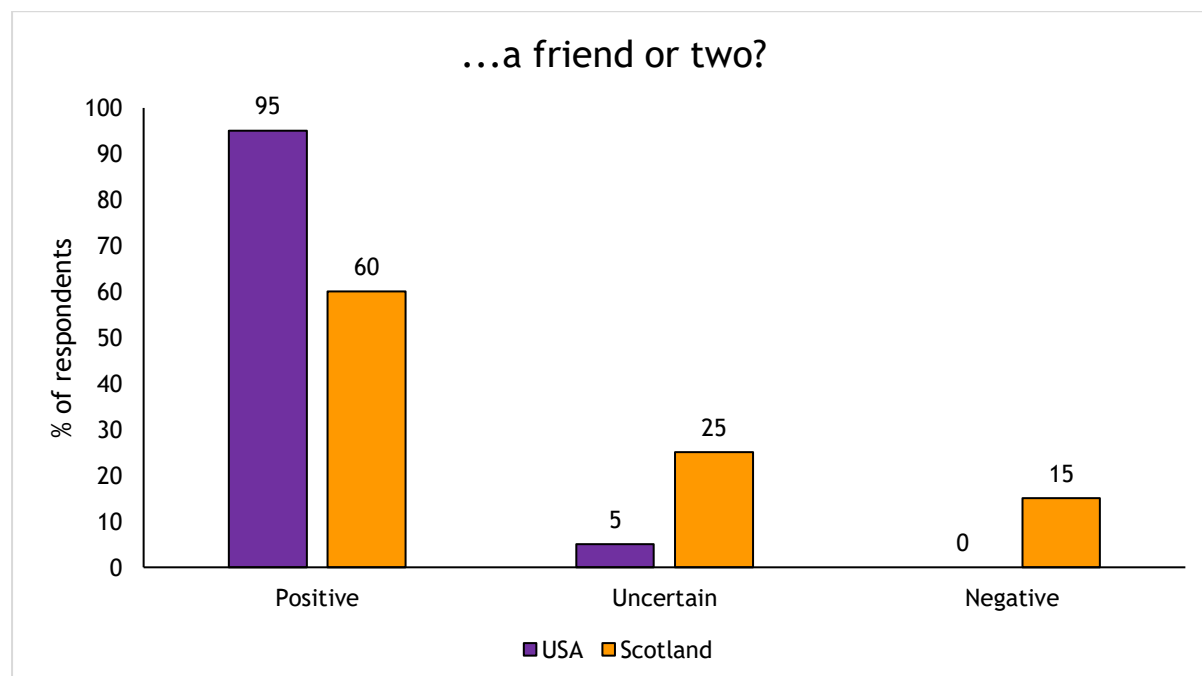
Although there isn't a vast difference in the percentage of negative responses across both groups, it is significant that not one Scottish respondent identified as a writer. I am reminded of Sally Ventura's thoughts on this matter:

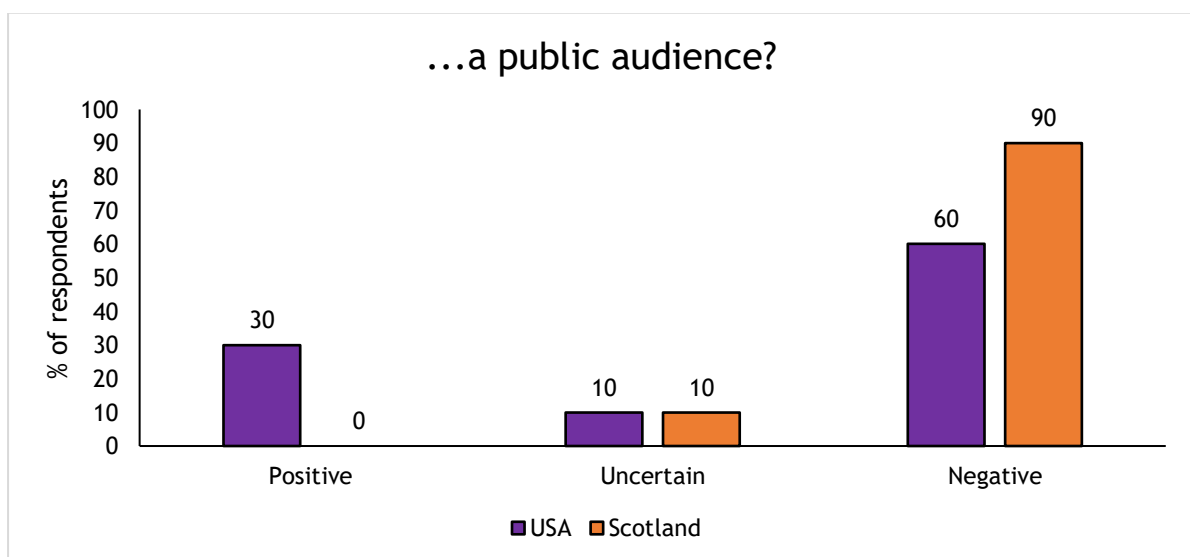
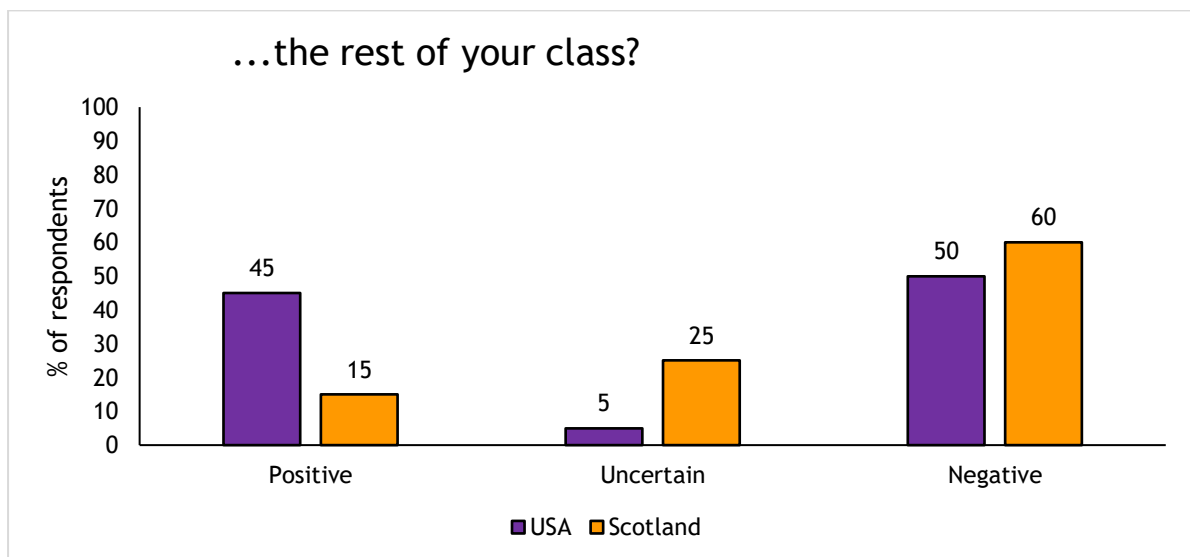
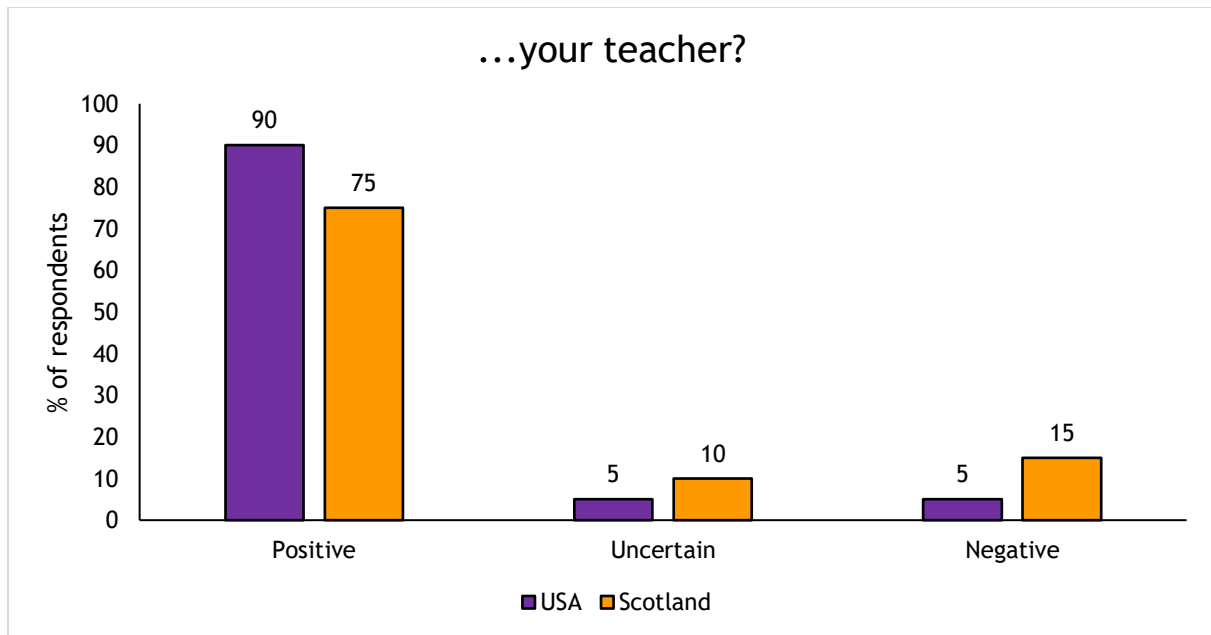
I had recently attended a conference during which keynote speaker, Kylene Beers, reminded us that name-calling, for good or for ill, is significant in the development of a child's identity. Therefore, she urged, when students are reading, we must be sure to address them as "readers," and when they are writing, we must make a point of calling them "writers." If we call our students readers, we help them to develop their identity as readers; if we call them writers, we are helping them see themselves as writers.

One very simple, instantly implementable approach I can take to rectify this issue is enforcing and reinforcing that by engaging in the act of writing, my pupils are writers. It is essential that I am a driving force in helping to construct this identity and also deconstruct the myth of what 'being a writer' is.

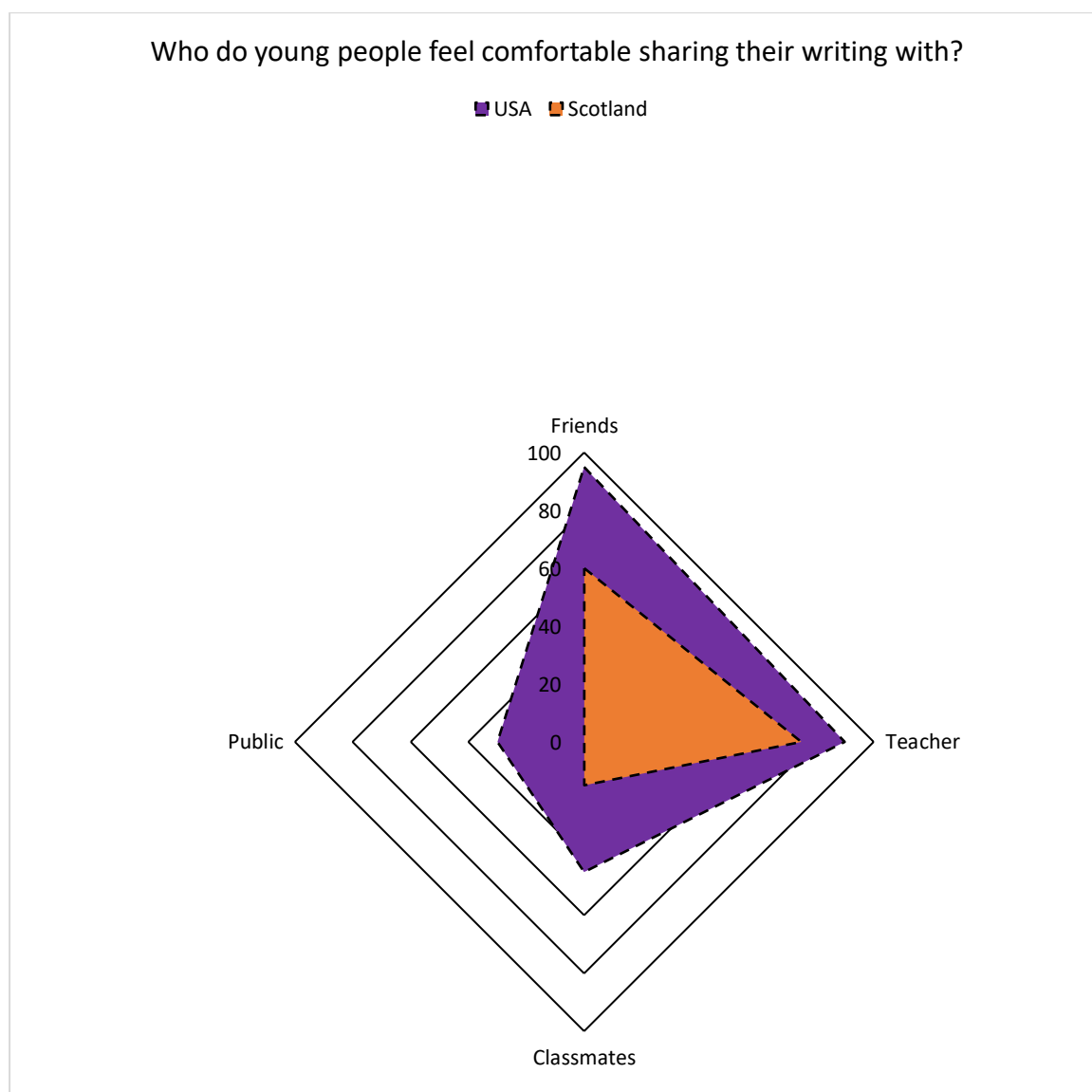
Question 5

How do you feel about sharing what you have written with:





An alternative visual representation (in radar chart form) of question 5 results:



In all four areas, Scottish respondents were much more negative about the prospect of sharing their writing with others, particularly with a larger audience (in a classroom or public setting.) By contrast, American respondents were much more comfortable with the idea of sharing their writing with their peers, in small or large groups. I was heartened by many of the accompanying answers to the question “How do you feel about hearing your peers share their writing?” which indicated a supportive ethos amongst peers. 100% of the responses to this question from American pupils were positive. For example:

“I would feel proud and impressed that my peers are able to share their writing.”

“I love it! I’m always really proud of them.”

“I find it very interesting and a lot of the time I am inspired.”

The reasons given for reluctance to share work was also enlightening. Amongst Scottish respondents, 35% indicated that they would be prevented from sharing their work by a lack of confidence in the quality of their writing. A greater number - 45% - cited reasons related to fear of judgement or ridicule from peers. Amongst American students, 40% indicated that they would be prevented from sharing their work by a lack of confidence in the quality of their writing. Only 20% of reasons cited related to fear of judgement or ridicule from peers. The figures suggest that there is much greater social anxiety related to sharing work with peers amongst Scottish pupils and that, perhaps, a more encouraging and kind ethos exists in American classrooms.

A final finding that is of interest is the response to the questions “What do you think are the benefits of creative writing?” and “What do you think are the benefits of sharing your written work?”. 20% of Scottish respondents felt that the benefits of creative writing were related to their wellbeing. On the other hand, three times as many - 60% - of American respondents felt that there were health and wellbeing benefits, using terms such as “therapeutic”, “relaxing”, “confidence” and “an outlet for emotions” in their expanded answers. If anything, this only confirms the worth in the American approaches to creative writing workshops and the scope for these approaches to positively impact on Scottish teenagers’ social and emotional wellbeing.

Greater curricular focus on creative writing and writing workshops:

I am more certain than ever that the existing perception of creative writing, and talking about writing, in the Scottish classroom must be changed. Considering American students’ views on the matter reveals that the value creative writing is afforded in the US curriculum is important to them. US teaching professionals - and their students - are clear advocates for a greater focus on creative writing rather than persistently writing ‘academically’ for testing. One thing I am now keen to discuss with my department is the potential to rework the opening months of the S1 English course outline. Pupils are coming to us from Primary 7 in the middle of an upwards academic trajectory. Perhaps the best idea is not the current term-long focus on the study of a novel. Perhaps there is scope to do better and build more effectively on the academic achievement and confidence of early adolescence by focusing on a course that is more personal, reflective and creates stronger relationships between teacher and pupil. I am reminded of Sally Ventura’s ‘High Schooler’s Guide to Happiness’ unit, which empowers her students to embrace creativity, develop life skills and articulate their own experiences. Sally reflects:

One of the greatest benefits I discovered since implementing my happiness unit is that as my students have gotten to know themselves, I’ve gotten to know my students better. I celebrate their stories of resiliency and I applaud the challenges they embrace in formulating goals. But most of all, I know their work is critical to our shared humanity.

The importance of community:

There are certainly ways I could foster a greater sense of community in my classroom. As in Kerrin McCadden's classroom in Montpelier High School, I am committed to ensure that when writing is happening as part of my lessons, I write with the pupils, laying myself bare as I model the reality of the writing process and respond to their feedback. In my six years of teaching, I have always found that my preference for classroom seating is desks of twos, in rows. Although my class sizes make it difficult to have cosy, tutorial-style group seating, I am going to experiment with different layouts: a horseshoe shape or a number of group tables. Although I am limited by small space in my classroom, I am committed to making the room more appealing with some homely touches like fairy lights and textiles, to create a more attractive space in which to write. Additionally, I am very keen to explore the possibility of a "third space", as endorsed by 826 and Dawn Potter, a dedicated space for writing that is separate to the classroom but has the appropriate atmosphere and ambience for creativity to thrive.

My trip has also allowed me to see the potential for community engagement and to find ways to implement my findings in a wider environment. Vermont Reads is an excellent example of a community-uniting initiative that has had a strong impact on the city of Montpelier and could just as easily work as Dunfermline Reads. Long-term, there is no reason I cannot explore the options for running writing workshops for parents and members of the community.

Celebrating success:

Celebration of success is going to be one of my key focuses as I take my research forward. The publications from Olean High School, 826 Boston and The Telling Room were of a professional standard and I would use what I have learned about fundraising to make sure I could match the incredible work I have been so inspired by. I was also reminded during my time at The Telling Room that celebration of success is important throughout the writing process, not just at the end. As such, in the weeks since my return to Scotland, I have been working with my 1st year class on entries for the BBC 500 Words competition. As well as intending to have a showcase day and awards ceremony, we have been displaying and celebrating words, sentences and characters that have been written so far. This created a positive ethos and supportive environment during the writing periods.

Social and emotional wellbeing:

Overwhelmingly, my observations in schools and in writing centres revealed a much greater level of comfort and confidence when it came to talking about the writing process and sharing writing. One of the simplest yet most powerful ideas I was inspired by was the idea of 'checking in'. To start any writing workshop - or, indeed, lesson - with every person in the room articulating how they are feeling, or by sharing something "low-barrier" (like their favourite cereal) means that the priority has been ensuring that every voice is heard.

I have been furnished with some excellent ideas as to how to overcome the problem of reticence and reluctance when it comes to sharing writing. So often, the cause of this is nervousness and fear. By taking the time to explore and address the physicality of these feelings, we allow a young person to take control of the situation. Performance training and yoga feel like very ‘American’ approaches to overcoming anxiety - and it’s obviously working! Equipping pupils with strategies to support them as writers who share their work is vital.

I am absolutely convinced of how worthwhile it is to get a young person to this stage. Being out of their comfort zone and challenging themselves can be incredibly empowering. As Montpelier High School student, Shyloh, explained:

Reading aloud and speaking your words aloud is so interesting because you're thinking as you're reading. Often your thinking changes and the meaning of your work can even change in that moment.

I am more certain than ever that reading one’s work aloud (or hearing it read aloud by another) is a vital part of the writing process. When we speak aloud or hear a piece or writing, we transform into a reader, seeing the piece ‘from the other side’ and thus appreciating the full meaning of the words. As Oswego Middle School teacher Dan Rose writes: “Writing isn’t over till we share.”

Academic attainment:

As stated from the outset, I firmly believe that embedding American-inspired approaches to writing workshops has the potential to monumentally impact a young person’s academic achievement. One of the most effective pedagogical approaches I witnessed was Dan Rose’s approach to embedding critical language in students’ written and verbal responses by providing them with a framework for their thoughts. Prompts that help a young person articulate their response to a piece of writing is a powerful support mechanism until talking about writing becomes an organic thing.

In every school I visited, I was struck by the flexibility and choice afforded students. Through observation, my overall impression is that American students are conscientious and take greater accountability for their learning (due in part, I’m sure, to frequently-graded assignments and strong focus on testing.) As a result of this attitude towards learning they are allowed more freedom and choice than pupils in Scotland generally experience. This is particularly true in very able students. Since I have been back in my classroom, I have already trialled this concept with my high-ability 3rd year class, who have just finished reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Rather than work towards the completion of a ‘traditional’, end-of-unit critical essay, they are taking part in a two-week experiment where they have freedom of choice over how they respond to the novel. Ensuring I maintain an experimental approach to pedagogy is a renewed resolve.

As an English professional, I am used to dealing in words. Analysing data to inform my practice is somewhat outwith my comfort zone but something I will be challenging myself with in coming months. As well as holistic observation, it is necessary to use ongoing before and after surveys - in the style of 826 Boston - with classes to measure the impact of my USA-inspired approaches to writing workshops.

Finally, I cannot report on my findings without mentioning the firm no-phones policy that is in place in the three schools I spent time in. The impact of this is clearly monumental. Young people move around the school or sit in the library during study time and actually engage with the world. In class, lessons are not interrupted to battle with a student over having their hidden under their desk. I'm more convinced than ever that phone usage in schools is having a colossal, detrimental impact on the academic and social development of our kids. It is an epidemic. When phones are simply removed from the equation, students behave, focus and engage with each other meaningfully. It is a controversial topic in educational debate but having witnessed first-hand its effect, a strictly enforced no-phones policy in Scottish schools is something I would fully support.

Conclusion:

Upon returning to the UK, I have utilised my own sense of American confidence and have proactively arranged to further my research. As well as two local newspapers featuring articles about my trip, I will be writing articles about my findings for *Teaching Today* and the *Times Educational Supplement*. I am very much conscious of not limiting the potential impact of my findings to my own practice. As such, I am not only writing about my research but, fittingly, am talking about it too. Firstly, I am running a professional development session for colleagues in my own school where I will discuss ways in which my research may find relevance across the curriculum, not just in English. In addition, the Scottish Book Trust have invited me to speak at their staff conference in March. The Scottish Book Trust's current priority is to promote the value of creative writing in schools, and I hope to be able to work alongside them developing ideas for writing workshop approaches. I will also soon be meeting with Gerald Richards, former CEO of 826 National, who now runs Edinburgh's Super Power Agency. Being able to expand upon my research and explore potential collaborations is very exciting.

I am endlessly grateful to have been awarded the Walter Hines Page scholarship by the ESU, and to the NASUWT for sponsoring my trip. Immersing myself in American culture for two weeks has been one of the greatest times of my life, professionally and personally. I anticipated that the trip would feel somewhat like a summation or fulfilment of my research proposal. In fact, it has been the opposite. The schools I have visited, students I have met and professionals I have spoken with have greatly inspired me to take my research forward and it feels very much like a beginning.

"So she enjoyed herself heartily, and found, what isn't always the case, that her granted wish was all she had hoped." (Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*)

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