A critical investigation, using approaches drawn from action research, into how Year 7 students' writing can be developed through the use of authentic contexts

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Abstract

This paper arises from a small-scale investigation into how authentic audiences can be used to improve students' writing and enhance their attitudes towards writing and editing in school. The study drew on approaches taken from action research and involved a teaching sequence of three lessons with a Year 7 class in a comprehensive, co-educational 11-18 school. Findings suggest that giving these students an opportunity to write for real readers beyond the classroom not only had a positive impact on their motivation to write and edit their work, but also improved the quality of the writing produced as a result.

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Introduction

The National Curriculum promotes activities which teach students how to "write clearly, accurately and coherently, adapting their language and style in and for a range of contexts, purposes and audiences" (DfE, 2013, p.2; DfE, 2014, p.3). Throughout secondary school, students are assessed on their ability to "produce texts which are appropriate to task, reader and purpose" (DfCSF, 2008) and to demonstrate an "awareness of the reader / intended audience" in their writing (WJEC, 2010, p.28). For students to truly appreciate how to adapt their language to suit different audiences, it seems essential, in my opinion, that they should experience what it is like to write for a range of readers. Yet, from my experience both as a student and a trainee teacher, almost all of the writing I have seen students do in school is, ultimately, only produced for the same, single audience: their teacher.

At the start of my second teaching placement, there was a concern in the English department that many students seemed to become increasingly indifferent towards writing as they progressed through the Key Stages. Their detachment from writing also appeared to affect their willingness to edit their work; once they had finished writing, they saw little point in making substantial revisions beyond checking for spelling mistakes. It would seem that these attitudes are reflected in the wider population, too: the National Literacy Trust has reported that secondary school students "continue to pose a particular problem when it comes to enjoyment of writing and attitudes towards writing" (Clark, 2014, p.11), with only one in ten students in Key Stages 3 and 4 saying that they enjoy writing very much, compared with nearly one in four Key Stage 2 students (ibid.).

The focus for this small-scale research project therefore arose from a need to identify how best to improve young people's attitudes towards writing in my school, not only to teach them the pleasure of writing but also to combine curriculum policy with practice and facilitate students' progress by

teaching them in real terms how to adapt their language to suit wider audiences. I aimed to ascertain whether using authentic contexts for students' writing could have a positive impact on their writing and motivation to write, by making the process more 'real' and relevant for them.

Context

The project involved a Year 7 English class in a comprehensive, co-educational 11- 18 school located in the centre of a city in East Anglia. The school is larger than average, and there is a higher than average proportion of students from minority groups and those who do not have English as a first language.

The class comprises thirty-two 11- to 12-year-old students, with almost equal numbers of girls and boys. It is a lowest set group. Three students have English as an additional language, including one who has only very recently arrived from China. Nine of the students are eligible for pupil premium and six students are classed as having specific or moderate learning difficulties or social, emotional, mental health needs.

Literature review

Motivation and attitudes towards writing

A significant amount of the research carried out in relation to students' writing concerns the attitudes they have towards writing in school. As part of the 'We're Writers' project, Grainger, Goouch and Lambirth (2003) sought to investigate students' perceptions of writing in schools which had "expressed concerns about the uninspired nature" (p.5) of their students' attitudes towards writing. The data collection and analysis methods adopted for the project seem appropriate given the exploratory nature of the research and the researchers' conceptual emphasis on the significance of student perspective: a qualitative questionnaire and a sample of semi-structured interviews were conducted across the eight primary schools to substantiate responses and check emerging themes. Grainger et al. acknowledge that "pupils' attitudes were inevitably influenced by the context and culture of each school" (ibid., p.6), and they are careful not to make inappropriate levels of generalisation in their conclusions. However, little detail is given regarding the particular context and culture of the schools and the students selected for the research, which makes it difficult

to assess the applicability of the findings to other contexts. Nevertheless, a relatively large sample of 390 students was surveyed and the researchers used a stratified sampling method for the purposes of their data collection, which may have helped to enhance the representativeness of the data.

Whilst the project was concerned with primary school students, it is arguable that the data obtained from students in the upper years may reflect the most recent experiences of the Year 7 students in my study. Their findings do, in fact, echo the concerns identified by my placement school, and point towards an "indifferent, somewhat detached disposition" (ibid., p.8) amongst a number of students in Years 5 and 6, who "could apparently see little relevance in writing" (ibid.). Overall, the project suggests that students' interest in writing declines with age during the primary years: a concerning prospect for a secondary English teacher. Grainger et al. conclude their report by commenting that "the importance of motivation and self-esteem in learning [deserves] still greater attention and response from the [teaching] profession" (ibid., p.12). For the purposes of my research, then, I was keen to address these findings in practical terms, to examine in more detail what specific strategies might be successful in improving students' motivation to write and enhancing their sense of the 'relevance' of writing. As an English teacher, it is, after all, of fundamental importance that I continually seek to identify new ways of encouraging enthusiasm for writing amongst young people.

In this regard, Burnett and Myers (2002) have investigated children's active engagement with literacy practices outside school, examining what motivates students and what could make literacy more meaningful to them in school. Their research suggests that whilst the attitudes of students towards school writing identified by Grainger et al. may be far from positive, their motivation to write and engage with other literacy practices outside school is entirely different.

The size and scope of the study was narrow (limited to the experiences of sixteen students at one primary school in Sheffield), but the report contains a 'thick' description of the sample of four students to assist the reader in evaluating the relevance of the research in other contexts (indeed, half of the students were aged 11 with multi-lingual backgrounds, which is similar to a number of students in my Year 7 class). The discussion of the findings also acknowledges that further research would need to be carried out to ascertain the applicability of the results to different settings. Students took photographs to record the use of literacy in their lives, followed up with semi-structured interviews with the same students. The students explained the significance of the images,

thereby allowing the researchers to "access the experiences, attitudes and values underpinning the events they represented" (Burnett & Myers, 2002, p.57). Whilst the subjective, interpretative nature of these methods makes them difficult to replicate to check findings, the approach complements Burnett and Myers' research focus and conceptual framework; like Grainger et al., they prioritise the value and "validity of children's voices" (ibid.). My research similarly draws on students' own perceptions as a significant part of my data.

Burnett and Myers' findings indicate that students engage enthusiastically in a wide range of writing practices outside school, and they note that the students in their study sought to participate in activities that were "meaningful to them [...] framed by their relationships, interests and values" (ibid.). These results match the data produced by a similar, but more recent, case study of children's out-of-school writing carried out by Earl and Grainger in 2007, which also found that students' production of texts outside school "offered them considerable satisfaction and were highly purposeful" (as cited in Cremin & Myhill, 2012, p.90). In light of these findings, Burnett and Myers (2002) query to what extent teachers' classroom practice provides opportunities for students to "own and shape their literacy experiences in school" (ibid., p.62); they suggest that teachers should use students' personal motivations to find "purposes and contexts for literacy [within school] that are [just as] meaningful to them" (ibid.) as those outside school. In order to successfully motivate students in the classroom, it seems that we must find ways of bringing their outside motivations, interests and values into the classroom. It is this notion of combining school and home literacy practices, of somehow introducing the 'real', outside world into English lessons, which I was interested to explore further and which I will turn to next.

Authentic contexts for writing

Cremin and Myhill (2012) note that without a "sense of connection to their writing, young writers are less likely to be truly engaged or motivated" (p.86). As suggested above in relation to Burnett and Myers' study, they argue that this 'connection' can be facilitated by blurring the boundaries between home and school writing practices; that is, by increasing the "real-world relevance and use of writing" (ibid., p.89) through activities in the classroom which "capitalise on genuine reasons for writing and seek out other audiences beyond the learners' peers [and] teachers" (ibid.). This seems to suggest that use of authentic contexts and wider audiences for the purposes of writing in school may help to 'bridge the gap' between students' enjoyment of writing inside and outside of school. It

is not clear, however, on what basis Cremin and Myhill's claims are made in relation to these particular points, making it difficult to assess the weight of their assertions. In their introduction to this particular work, they do refer to a number of research studies which they state to have "drawn on to advance [their] argument and to prompt reflection" (ibid., p.2), but the relevant projects are not referred to in the main text.

Nevertheless, their claims are supported by other literature, including additional research carried out by Lambirth and Goouch (2006). Whilst their main focus is on the benefits of writing journals in schools, their rationale for using these is based on a substantial amount of research carried out by themselves and others in schools, addressing how students can "become successful and effective writers" (p.146). They stress how authentic contexts for writing can "have a significant influence on children's affective engagement in writing events" (ibid.), and draw on research carried out by Graves in the 1980s (and their own, more recent, studies) to suggest that "the development of an individual voice in writing is closely connected with an emerging sense of identity and an understanding of writing as a communicative act with the potential to make an impact on a reader" (ibid., p.147). According to Lambirth and Goouch, children feel more connected with writing if it "concerns what they know and have lived" (ibid.). This notion of developing students' 'identity' as writers reflects the approach of projects introduced by Cremin and Myhill to facilitate students' awareness of, and participation in, the wider 'community' of writers and readers. As Myhill (2012) observes, "writing is quintessentially about social practice, and learning about being writers within a community of practice" (p.2). In essence, authentic contexts for writing would seem to motivate students to write "affectively [and] energetically" (Lambirth & Goouch, 2006, p.151) because they can start to develop a sense of identity and power through their writing by communicating with real readers in real communities around them: that is, in contexts where their voices matter and where they are writing about what really matters to them.

I was interested, therefore, to ascertain whether the use of authentic contexts and wider audiences for writing might indeed improve my students' attitudes towards writing. Not only this, but I was also keen to explore the effect all of this might have on the students' writing itself. Cremin and Myhill suggest that authentic contexts for writing give students an opportunity to "follow through and make public their work" (ibid.), which in turn is likely to develop their "sense of responsibility [for their writing] particularly if a response is expected and sought" (ibid.). Similarly, reflecting on the results of the 'We're Writers' project referred to above, Grainger et al. (2005) and Lambirth and

Goouch (2006) also explore how, when writing for real purposes and audiences, "children can become more aware of the impact and influence of [their] writing" (Grainger et al., 2005, p.67) and at the same time "drive their own progress" (Lambirth & Goouch, 2006, p.147). What these researchers do not explore, though, is the effect these matters may then have on the actual writing produced by students; in other words, if authentic contexts can enhance students' motivation and sense of responsibility for their work, what effect could this have on the quality of the writing they produce?

Improving students' writing

The National Writing Project (NWP) (1989) provided one of the most comprehensive investigations into the benefits of finding 'real' opportunities for students to write, involving "hundreds of teachers and thousands of students" (ibid., p.3) in primary and secondary schools across twenty-four local authorities. Echoing the position of the researchers discussed above, the conclusions drawn from the project were that by giving students real "readership for their writing beyond that offered by the teacher [they] can begin to feel the power to influence and persuade, to give pleasure or even to invite criticism" (ibid*.,* pp.7 − 8). Not only this, but the researchers also suggest that, by increasing students' motivation to write and their ownership of their writing, "the length and quality of written work increase" (ibid., p.8), because it provides students with "the impetus to sustain effort through several drafts and gives the teacher an unquestionable justification for demanding technical accuracy and good presentation" (ibid.). The results indicate that "when young people can see a reason for writing and have some sense of who is going to read their writing, they find it easier to organise information clearly [and] to write directly and accurately" (ibid., p.11). There appeared to me, then, to be two crucial benefits of finding real audiences for students' writing: to encourage students to remain interested in their writing whilst at the same time improving the writing they produce as a result.

However, the nature of the evidence provided by the project makes the basis of its claims rather problematic (Wray, 1993). The reports on the project comprise teachers' accounts and reflections on their own classroom practice, and no details are given in the individual articles as to the teachers' methodologies or research methods. The evidence appears, for the most part, anecdotal, based on the teachers' own interpretations of student behaviour and their written outcomes; little reference is made to any triangulation of data sources to check the reliability of the findings. This is, of course,

less of an issue for the teachers themselves, the purpose of the investigations being, for them, mainly "awareness-enhancers" (ibid., p.68) for their own practice. It makes it difficult, though, for other readers to rely on the more general conclusions drawn from them, which are couched in terms that suggest the findings have a wider applicability beyond their original contexts.

This idea of using authentic audiences as a means of improving students' writing skills has been explored more recently by Frater (2004) within the context of grammar teaching. He draws on a case study of a Year 7 writer in an inner-city boys' school and the results of two surveys at Key Stages 2 to 4 of schools which were "unusually effective in teaching writing" (Frater, 2004, p.78) to examine how "real readerships [can] offer more secure ways of promoting progress in writing" (ibid.*).* The size of the sample and contexts of the schools surveyed are not explained in the paper. It is not clear, either, whether Frater used follow-up interviews or other data sources to clarify and explore answers provided by the schools in the survey in more depth, although his discussions of the findings do suggest a 'deeper' investigation into the schools' reasons for adopting certain approaches.

One approach taken by the secondary schools in Frater's surveys was for students to write letters to local MPs on issues that concerned them; Frater emphasises that, crucially, "the letters were sent" (ibid., p.80), and it was this comment that prompted me to consider the importance of distributing students' work outside of the school context as part of my research. Frater's argument is that, by making "school writing as genuinely communicative (and consequently motivating) as possible" (ibid., p.82) and by encouraging students to focus on the "needs and likely responses" (ibid., p.79) of genuine readers of their writing, they experience how the process of drafting and revising a text is "well integrated in a common pursuit of meaning" (ibid., p.80). As a result, he argues that their writing becomes meaningful and purposeful, and this provides students with a real impetus (from themselves rather than from external persuasions) to continue to improve. I was encouraged through Frater's study to consider how authentic readers could encourage my students to revise and improve their writing in similar ways, and also to identify in more specific terms what aspects of their writing might improve as a consequence.

On this subject, Richards (2010) has investigated in more detail how students might be able to improve their writing through a particular kind of engagement with the revision process. Her study appears to adopt an action research approach, concerned with identifying in practical terms "what

changes can be made to classroom practice to enable students to improve the quality of their writing" (Richards, 2010, p.81). The participants in the study were nine Key Stage 3 students, purposively sampled to include some representation of the spread of ability in the school. Richards acknowledges that the sample size was limited by the scope of the research project, but the data collection and analysis methods are set out in detail in the report, which lends weight to the validity and accuracy of the results. 'Think-aloud' protocols formed the main method of data collection, which were appropriate given the aim of the project (to investigate students' perceptions of the revision process), allowing the researchers to "identify thinking that is not directly observable" (Taber, 2013, p.279). Whilst this method is limited in that it "can only access thinking the participant is aware of" (ibid., p.280), Richards also used semi-structured interviews as a way of addressing this limitation, allowing her to probe students' thinking further.

Richards (2010) makes a distinction in her report between students making "surface changes" (ibid., p.80) (changes to technical aspects of writing such as presentation, spelling, punctuation and grammar) and "meaning changes" (ibid.) (changes to compositional aspects of writing such as structure, content and style) during the revision process. This distinction echoes discussions in previous research carried out by Wray (1993) in primary schools, which found an "overwhelming preoccupation [amongst students] with the secretarial skills in writing" (p.72). Likewise, as Richards (2010) observes, "the trend which emerges from [previous] research is that students in secondary school make surface changes far more frequently than they make meaning changes and believe the former to be characteristic of 'good' writing" (ibid., p.80). Richards' analysis of the students' work during the project indicated a shift in "students' focus away from the correction of surface features" (ibid., p.88); instead, students made a significantly higher proportion of "meaning changes" (ibid.) to their writing. Her explanation for this is that the peer-questioning strategies adopted by the students during the revision process helped them to "make the audience visible [...] to have a working image of the reader" (Richards, 2010, p.89) in their mind as they wrote. Richards' emphasis on the importance of audience and the writer-reader relationship for these students prompted me to consider in more detail the impact authentic contexts may have on students' writing. If students' 'construction' of their version of an audience could encourage them to edit and improve compositional aspects of their writing and move them away from a preoccupation with technical aspects, it was possible that giving students a genuine audience to consider whilst writing and editing could have a similar, if not greater, effect on the quality of their writing.

As Wiliam (2002) argues, it is not sufficient to assume that all readers' concepts of 'quality' will be the same, and as such English teachers "need to have an anatomy of quality [...] to understand how quality is built up, what are its components" (Marshall & Wiliam, 2002, pp.54, 56). With this in mind, it was necessary for me to identify and make explicit the specific features I would be looking for in students' writing as an indication of its 'quality', and these are included below with the findings of this study.

Research questions

It was evident from my review of relevant literature that there was a strong argument for giving students opportunities in school to write for real audiences. Two research questions therefore emerged as important for the purposes of this project, designed to test whether and how the findings of previous studies might translate to the context of my Year 7 class:

1. How does giving students an authentic audience enhance their motivation to (a) write; and (b) edit and improve their work? (RQ1)

2. How does giving students an authentic audience for their work improve the quality of their writing, specifically in terms of (a) the extent to which it demonstrates an awareness of the intended audience; and (b) accuracy, vocabulary choice and organisation? (RQ2)

Teaching sequence

The teaching sequence for the research formed an introductory unit for a new writing scheme, and involved the students drafting a letter to an author of their choice and revising this over the course of three lessons using a self-assessment checklist (Appendix 1). At the end of the third lesson, the final versions of the letters were sent off to the authors. My research focus complemented the aims of the unit (addressing writing and editing skills) and meant that I could explore the effect of students writing to and for real audiences at the same time as ensuring that they achieved the necessary learning envisaged by the unit.

I chose letters as the form of writing to teach for the sequence because of the obvious connection it has with writing for an audience. The intention was that the visual link with the audience through a named addressee might facilitate students' awareness of their audience and draw their attention to

the possibility of receiving a response from their reader (Cremin & Myhill, 2012; Frater, 2004). Before the first lesson, students were instructed to research their audience, to equip them with background information about their intended reader. I deliberately did not tell them that their letters were actually going to be sent off until the second lesson, because I wanted to investigate what difference (if any) it would make to the students' writing and motivation once they knew they would be engaging in real terms with the audience they had chosen.

Ethical Issues

The British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines state that "in all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child must be the primary consideration" (BERA, 2011, p.5). The class teacher therefore acted as 'gatekeeper' for the purposes of consent for all research activities carried out as part of the normal processes of teaching in the classroom. For all other activities, I obtained the students' voluntary informed consent to ensure that they understood and agreed to their participation in the research process (BERA, 2011). I also obtained formal written consent from the interviewees and appropriate adults by way of an information sheet and consent form. The questionnaires and information sheet informed students of their right to withdraw from the research and confirmed the confidential and anonymous treatment of data. Students have been given fictional names in this report to preserve their anonymity.

Methodology

My research project draws on approaches taken from action research. The practical orientation of this methodology, "aimed at dealing with real-world problems" (Denscombe, 2014, p.123), meant that my research could relate directly to the issues identified in the local context of my placement school. The concept of action research as a cyclical process also complements the ongoing cycle of planning, teaching and critical evaluation at the heart of teaching practice (Taber, 2013); it could therefore form an intrinsic part of my teaching, "undertaken as part of practice rather than a bolt-on addition to it" (Denscombe, 2014, p.123), enabling my research and teaching to mutually inform the other. The "context-directed" (Taber, 2013, p.143) nature of action research meant that my research could enhance, rather than detract from, my awareness of the teaching and learning in my classroom.

Action research also provided me with the means through which I could actively "set out to alter things" (Denscombe, 2014, p.122), changing my practice in ways which might help to address the concerns identified in my school. From a professional development perspective, this emphasis on "problem-solving" (Taber, 2013, p.143) dovetailed neatly with my ongoing desire to continue to develop as an effective teacher. As Denscombe comments, though, the highly-contexualised scope of action research leaves it "vulnerable to the criticism that the findings relate to one instance and should not be generalised beyond [the] specific 'case'" (Denscombe, 2014, p.128). Nevertheless, the primary purpose of my research was not to develop "abstracted theoretical knowledge that can claim to be generally applicable" (Taber, 2013, p.149), but instead to seek to improve student learning at a micro level within my particular context.

Research methods

Data addressing my first research question was collected through questionnaires, interview, observations and students' written reflections. The students' letters provided the primary data for my second research question.

Questionnaires and interview

Questionnaire 1 (Appendix 2) was issued at the start of the project, designed to explore what motivates (or would motivate) these students to write, what they least enjoy about writing and their attitudes towards editing their work. Questionnaire 2 (Appendix 3) was issued at the end of the sequence, to examine whether the use of a real audience had enhanced the students' motivation to write and edit their work.

The nature of the information sought from the students through these questionnaires, "exploring beliefs, values and opinions [...] rather than testing knowledge and understanding" (Taber, 2013, p.266), made them appropriate for this aspect of the project. It was also a method which would enable me to gather a large amount of data in a relatively short amount of time, thereby minimising the impact of my research on student learning. I am aware, however, that "sometimes the ways [questions] are posed in part determine the responses elicited" (Taber, 2013, p.269) from questionnaires, and the wording of my questions (despite efforts to avoid 'leading' questions) may have influenced students' answers. To test the reliability of responses, I used the interview and

student reflections to allow me to check that the students' opinions were consistent in each set of results.

I arranged a follow-up group interview with the same sample of students selected for the purposes of observation and document analysis (see below), designed to test, clarify and explore particular lines of enquiry identified from the other data sources. Interviewing the students as a group allowed the students to 'feed off' each other's comments, enabling the opinions of one student to "act as a stimulus for another" (Taber, 2013, p.277). Similarly, I used a semi-structured interview approach to allow me to follow up interesting lines of enquiry and to leave sufficient flexibility for students to "develop ideas and speak more widely" (Denscombe, 2014, p.186) on key issues.

Observation

I asked the regular class teacher to make notes on the student sample. As motivation itself is not an overt behaviour capable of being observed directly, the teacher was asked to infer how motivated students appeared at different times. The teacher recorded any comments and visible behaviours relevant to the research questions. As the reliability of this type of observation can be difficult to verify because it is based on the "selective perception" (Denscombe, 2014, p.206) and interpretation of events by the particular observer, I also made observation notes during the lesson sequence, to allow the evidence to be compared for consistency.

It was important, as far as practicable, to establish "a representative picture of the situation [and] cover a cross-section of the whole research population" (ibid., p.209). The student sample was therefore selected to reflect the spread of subgroups in the class, including lower and higher attaining students, those with special educational needs and those eligible to receive pupil premium. Having the students' normal class teacher as observer helped, to some extent, to retain the "naturalness of the setting" (ibid., p.210) and minimise any disruption to the situation being researched, as the students were used to the teacher being in the classroom and taking notes while I was teaching.

Learner productions

The purpose of analysing students' work was to provide, by way of a 'before and after' comparison, direct evidence as to whether and how the quality of students' writing improved once they knew

their letters would be sent off to the authors. In addition, all students in the class were asked to complete written reflections after each lesson on what they liked and disliked about the tasks.

The difficulty with using learner productions was that I had to 'read between the lines' and make certain assumptions when interpreting the data about what their responses inferred about their motivation or approach towards their work at that time (Denscombe, 2014; Taber, 2013). As with the questionnaires, students may have misinterpreted the statements in the written reflections, have written what they thought they should write, or have been unable to express their true opinions due to an "inability to effectively represent [their] thoughts into writing" (Taber, 2013, p.263). Again, triangulation of data collection from multiple sources enabled me to check that the results were suggesting consistent answers to my research questions.

Findings and discussion

RQ1: How does giving students an authentic audience enhance their motivation to (a) write; and (b) edit and improve their work?

(i)   Before the teaching sequence

Results from Questionnaire 1 provided an indication of the students' attitudes towards writing at the start of my teaching sequence. The responses to the closed questions are shown in Figure 1 below, including a table containing the relevant questions.

Many students commented in their responses to Question 2 that they enjoy writing the most when "you get to write your own opinion so you have your own say on what you think about it", or "when you can write about something that you like in your own perspective". In response to Question 4, one student (reflecting comments made by others) wrote that writing would be more enjoyable in school if "you could write more about yourself and things you have done instead of writing about things that don't matter"; it appeared from this that they were most motivated to write when they felt the activities were relevant and gave them an opportunity to voice their opinions on topics that mattered to them.

Question	Question wording in Questionnaire 1
Q1	Do you think the writing you do in English lessons is important?
Q6	Do you do any writing outside of school?
Q8	If you thought someone outside school might read your writing and respond to you about your work, would that change the way you felt about your writing?
Q9	Do you always read over your writing?
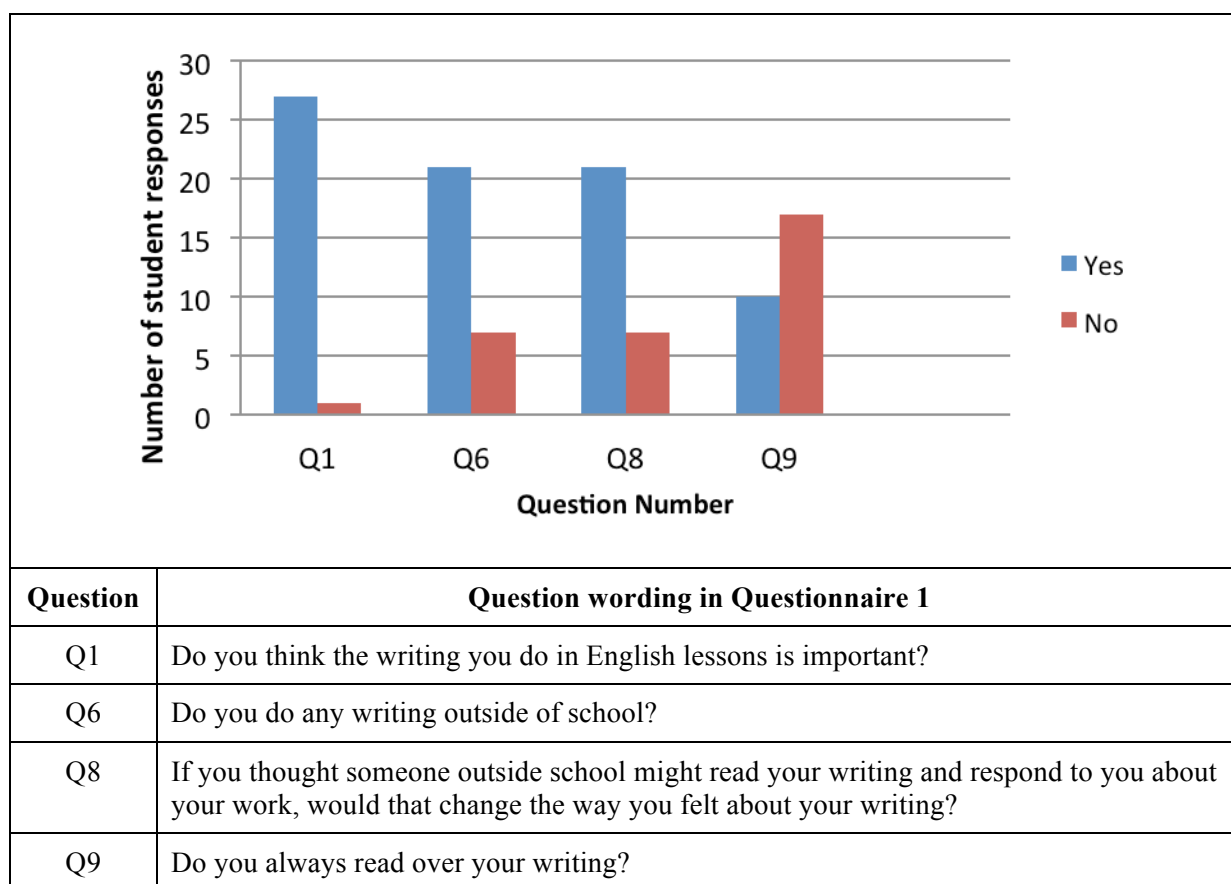
Figure 1: Responses to Questionnaire 1

The majority of my students said they participated in their own writing activities outside of school, itself a strong indication of their motivation to engage in 'real' writing. Even more interesting was the fact that letters, lists, websites and cards were frequently quoted as the forms of writing the students enjoyed writing most. Their responses revealed a desire amongst the students to participate in authentic, purposeful writing practices within a range of functional, social and personal contexts.

In contrast, when asked who normally reads the work they do in English lessons (Question 5), all but two students wrote "the teacher". This pointed towards a rather impoverished selection of audiences for these students, corroborating my previous observations of in-school writing activities. Indeed, 75% of students thought that their attitude towards their writing would change if a wider audience could read their school work and respond to them about it. In their explanatory comments for this question, students welcomed the prospect of wider audiences for their work, stating that "it would make me feel like people like my writing" and (perhaps most pertinent of all) "it would make me feel happy and warm because someone other than myself or a teacher would see my work". The

responses to Questionnaire 1 were encouraging, and suggested that the students might well be more motivated by the teaching sequence designed for this research.

(ii)   During the sequence

Students appeared engaged when composing their letters, even without knowing that they would be sent off; the fact they were writing letters to real authors they admired may, it seems, have provided sufficient motivation for them in the first lesson. Indeed, a strong theme in their written reflections was that they had liked the task because they could "be honest" and "express how [they] really felt about the book": reiterating again the importance for these students of being able to write about ideas and opinions that are both real and relevant.

However, what was noticeable was the students' lack of motivation to edit their work in the final part of the lesson, reflecting their responses to Question 9 of Questionnaire 1. All students were distracted and lost interest in self-assessing their work after approximately four minutes, each having made few (if any) changes to their work. When questioned about his lack of changes, Nick commented that "I don't feel like there is anything I would like to change", which contrasted directly with his attitude in the next lesson. Interestingly, whilst Nick and Joe had seemed most motivated to write their letters, they appeared the least motivated to revise them, suggesting that the authentic context for this first task had not been quite real enough for them to want to improve their work; in fact, one student even wrote in her reflection that she disliked the task because the letter was "not actually going to be seen by anyone else but the teachers", and that she would enjoy it even more if "it would actually go to the author!".

Students were visibly excited by the prospect of sending their letters off at the start of the second lesson (the class even cheered when I told them). It was interesting that the students were anxious to have more time to revise and improve their work, despite seeming to have lost interest with the revision process in the previous lesson. All students in the observation sample remained visibly engaged with re-reading and amending their work in the second lesson. Even Nick (who had initially been content with his first draft) decided he would need to 'start [his] again, properly'. Students had more questions relating to the correct layout and suggested content and structure of the letters, and were cross-checking their work against the self-assessment checklists: again, very different from the cursory approach taken in the first lesson.

The written reflections at the end of this lesson supported our observations: a common theme was that students had liked the lesson because they could "check for errors and change it before the author read it" and "improve so the letter was even better for the author". Unlike the first lesson, it seems that the students became internally driven to edit and improve their work because it was now possible that their letters might actually be read by their authors. This motivation was sustained throughout the final lesson, and the number of questions asked relating to the content and presentation of their writing also suggested that (without any prompting from me) students' desire to improve their work continued even when copying out their work from their exercise books.

Varying the time given for students to self-assess their work during the sequence did, however, make it difficult to determine with certainty what had caused the students to engage more thoroughly with the revision process in the second lesson: was it because they knew their letters were being sent off to a real audience, because I had given them significantly more time to edit their work, or a combination of both factors? Whilst existing research and the findings set out below suggest that it was the influence of the real audience, it would be interesting to set up further studies in controlled conditions to compare the relative impact of each of these variables in more detail.

(iii)   After the sequence

Responses to Questionnaire 2 substantiated the findings of the classroom observations (see Figure 2).

The results suggest that the majority of students responded positively to the introduction of a real audience for their work. A large proportion of students' responses to Questions 1 and 2 emphasised how choosing a real author to write to made them "feel more up to it, confident" and "excited" because they "knew who [they] were writing about" and "could give an honest opinion". Here, using real authors as the basis for their letters seemed to enable the students to approach the writing task with enthusiasm and confidence, capitalising on their own knowledge, experiences and opinions. Moreover, as Figure 2 shows, the majority of students said that their motivation increased even further once they found out the letters would be sent off to that person. 74% of students said that they enjoyed the writing task more as a result, and confirmed that their approach towards revising and editing their work became more "careful" and "focused", with them checking their work "better than the first time".

Question	Question wording in Questionnaire 2
Q1	Did being able to choose your own author or poet make a difference to your attitude towards the writing task?
Q2	Did researching the author or poet before the lesson help you to write the letter?
Q3	Did your attitude towards your writing change when you found out your letter was actually going to be sent off to the author or poet?
Q4	When you found out that the letters were going to be sent off, did you do the self-assessment task differently from the first time you did it?
Q8	Do you think knowing that you would be sending your letter off to a real person helped to improve your writing?
Q9	Would you like to be able to do more writing in English lessons for real people outside your class to read?

Figure 2: Responses to Questionnaire 2

For many students, this impetus to improve seemed to stem from the fact that their writing had suddenly become real, directed at other readers beyond the classroom ("because someone was actually reading it and not the teacher which meant what we wrote was real"). Their motivation to improve their work not only seemed to arise from a desire to impress that audience but also to encourage their reader to respond: "I wanted to make sure it was the best it could be so my author could read it and think wow"; "I wanted it to become perfect so they would answer back". When asked if they would like to do more writing for real people outside of their class to read, 84% said

that they would, with several stating that this would give them "more reasons to write", that "it would be amazing to get real responses" and that it would improve their writing because they would "keep changing [their] work so that it is the best for that person". There is a real sense of excitement, ownership and responsibility for writing in these comments: an indication (in line with the research of Cremin and Myhill (2012)) that the presence of an authentic audience had enabled them to connect with, and feel accountable for, their writing within a wider community of readers and writers who might read and respond to their work.

Discussions in the follow-up interview also indicated that students became more reader-orientated once they knew they would be sending the letters off:

> Joe: It was more about that person ... so they think you're a good writer.
>
> Michael: I wanted to write *more* to show them that I actually knew about them and their book.
>
> Rebecca: We had to get it really right for the person who was reading it so they actually feel what you're saying because they're um receiving it and feeling how it affects them.

Here, the students refer directly to their intended audiences and seem, like Richards' (2010) students, to have constructed a "working image of the reader" (ibid., p.89) in their minds. Enabling these students to communicate in real terms with their readers appeared to heighten their awareness of audience, which in turn encouraged them to work harder to revise their work and make it 'really right' for that person. There is an indication in these comments, too, that the students were not simply concerned with perfecting the accuracy of their work for their recipient; they also seem to have wanted to engage at a deeper level with that person and their work, motivated perhaps (in light of their replies to questionnaires) by a desire to 'affect' their reader and therefore invite a more meaningful response from them. This was reflected in the content of the students' letters and is examined further below.

At the end of the interview, I asked the students how the lessons had been different from normal English lessons and they explained as follows:

> Rebecca: It was different because we were writing to someone *actually* and not just to stay in our books.
>
> Nick: Yeah! It's not something your teacher's gonna see ... it's your own thing.

Rebecca and Nick spoke enthusiastically here; for these students, writing for a real, meaningful audience gave them an opportunity to experience the pleasure of purposeful writing ('writing to someone *actually*'), away from teacher scrutiny and the confines of their exercise books. As a result, it would appear that they were not only engaged from the outset with the drafting of the letter, but also grew increasingly motivated to edit and improve their writing. Their writing became their 'own thing', and they seemed to relish the chance, as one student commented, for 'more people' to read their work so that 'someone *actually*' could hear their voices beyond the classroom.

RQ2: How does giving students an authentic audience for their work improve the quality of their writing, specifically in terms of (a) the extent to which it demonstrates an awareness of the intended audience; and (b) accuracy, vocabulary choice and organisation?

It was clear from the responses to Question 8 of Questionnaire 2 (Figure 2) that the majority of students considered their work to have improved once they found out that their letters were being sent off. The purpose of this part of the project was to find out if this improvement was evident in the content of the students' work itself. I also wanted to use the responses to questionnaires and reflections as a way of examining students' thought processes behind the revisions they made.

Table 1 outlines the features I was looking for in the students' work as evidence of their (a) awareness of audience and (b) accuracy, vocabulary choice and organisation of ideas.

(a) awareness of audience	(b) accuracy, vocabulary choice and organisation
• attempts to engage the reader and/or persuade them to respond • reference to specific details or information relevant to the reader and/or their work	• correct spelling, punctuation and secure control of tense and agreement (accuracy) • varied and suitably ambitious vocabulary • logical sequencing and use of paragraphs to structure information and ideas (organisation)

Table 1: Features analysed in students' letters for the purposes of RQ2

With reference to Richards' (2010) distinction between "surface" and "meaning" (ibid., p.80) features of writing, for the purposes of this research accuracy is considered a 'surface' aspect whilst vocabulary choice, organisation and awareness of audience are considered 'meaning', or compositional, aspects of writing.

Analysis of Michael's final letter against previous drafts first seems to reflect the preoccupation with 'surface' changes found by Wray (1993), as the majority of his improvements relate to the accuracy of his writing (correcting punctuation and spellings). In interview, he likewise prioritised the importance of technical skills, noting that: 'sending the letters off made me work harder on spellings. I don't normally get the best spellings and punctuation'. Nevertheless, Michael also appears to have made a significant 'meaning' change in the final version of his letter, inserting a concluding paragraph which attempts to persuade the reader to respond to his letter ("I would love it if you replied because I'm a big lover of your books and it would be so cool if I had a letter from you"). This new persuasive element suggests that Michael had become more aware that his letter might actually be read by the intended audience, and therefore wished to capitalise on the opportunity of receiving a reply. Interestingly, he also explains more precisely why he likes the books, commenting that "I enjoy them because the storyline is funny and I like seeing how the main character survives Middle School". Having a clearer knowledge of his audience appears to have prompted Michael (albeit only briefly) to discuss his own response as reader in more depth than in the first draft.

The difference between Rebecca's drafts likewise indicates a noticeable improvement in the accuracy of her writing, with tenses, lower case and capital letters and spellings corrected during the revision process. Her revisions also include a number of 'meaning' changes, with more ambitious vocabulary amendments and structural improvements evident in the final version. While her first draft demonstrated some awareness of the intended audience through references to her opinion on specific parts of the book, her final letter includes more substantial exemplification as to why she found it exciting and details relating to the author's other books: an indication perhaps of her wanting to make changes, as she said in interview, 'to show them that I like them so much I did some research on them'. Rebecca's praise of the author's books increases across the drafts, indicating a desire to please her reader (including, for example, a reference to recommending a book "to my friend Charlotte" in the first draft which was then amended to "all my friends" in the second!). Like Nick, she also made amendments in the second lesson to try to persuade the reader to reply to her letter.

When asked in interview why he made changes to his work, Joe commented that 'normally, the teacher has set the work for you, so they'd understand more what you were on about, but somebody else wouldn't, so you have to put in more explanations so it makes sense and is clear for them'; this

notion of having to write differently for an outside audience is evident in his writing. In his second draft, Joe inserts three new sentences in each paragraph to develop points he has made about the author's book: giving his reader the extra detail and explanations he considers them to need. More attempts to engage the author are also demonstrated in the final version through the use of superlatives and exaggeration ("like" changed to "love", "you are a very good kid author" becoming "you are the best kid author around", and signing off as the author's "biggest friend"). His word choice and spelling improves throughout the drafts, and grammatical agreement is corrected twice in the final letter. As with Rebecca's letter, there is an impression, too, that he has considered how to make the sequencing of his ideas as clear and as logical as possible for the reader, 'signposting' his ideas in a new introductory sentence at the start of his letter. What is most interesting, however, is the way Joe's analysis of the book becomes much more explicit in his final draft. Not only does he include more information about the plot and characters, but he also starts to examine the writer's intentions behind certain structural features and his own interpretation of the text's themes and ideas: "I liked how you included a questionnaire at the end of the story to interact with the reader's life. Also, having this girl in Rowley's life really shows the downside of friendship. They used to be best friends but now they're not, because of her". Here, the content of Joe's writing points towards a much more sophisticated awareness of audience than his attempts elsewhere to flatter the reader; indeed, there is an indication that the presence of a genuine audience has prompted Joe to use his writing to explore and communicate his reading of the writer's work in a more meaningful way.

Similarly, Nick's comments at interview hint at a desire to adapt the 'meaning', or content, of his letter to encourage a response from his audience: 'when I knew they would read the letters it made me ask better questions to make them want to reply more'. The final version of his letter contains what appears to be a more purposeful attempt to engage his audience and elicit meaning from them: "I love your book because it is intense. Some parts of your books can be dramatic, like when he is running away from the Griever, or really emotional like when Chuck dies. How do you think of intense things like that?" When compared with the generic question Nick had included in his first draft ("Where do you get your ideas from?"), his discussion of the writer's work is noticeably more developed, referring to particular details to support his ideas and inviting a response from the author about a specific aspect of their craft. Knowing that the author might read his letter appears, then, to have injected a stronger sense of reciprocity into this student's writing.

It could perhaps have been useful to use 'think-aloud' protocols similar to those used in Richards' (2010) project, in order to gain a more accurate understanding of students' thinking behind their revisions and to see to what extent this was linked with the presence of a more authentic audience for their work. Nevertheless, the amendments made by these students to their work over the sequence do indicate that they were concerned with improving the compositional aspects of their writing as well as making 'surface' changes. Sending off the letters not only increased these particular students' motivation to improve their writing; it also enhanced the quality of their work by encouraging them to engage at a much deeper level with the meaning and substance of their writing.

Conclusion

Over the course of the study, a common theme emerged from students' responses to the questionnaires and interviews: that being able to choose their author (specifically 'not being told what to write about by the teacher') had given them an even stronger impetus to write. The effect of giving students a choice of subject matter for their writing (again making their work relevant by facilitating a connection with their real, outside interests) could, therefore, offer an interesting focus for future investigation.

The sample of students researched for the purposes of this project is, of course, much too small to be able to conclude with certainty that my findings could have wider applicability beyond their particular context. Nevertheless, the results correspond with existing research and suggest that giving these students an opportunity to write for real readers, about subjects that mattered to them, enhanced their motivation to write and, more importantly, to carry on improving their work. Consequently, the technical and compositional aspects of students' writing improved, most noticeably through the students' attempts to engage their audiences with more meaningful discussions about the authors' work. I will, going forward, seek to create as many opportunities as possible for my students to write within a range of authentic contexts, not only to promote their enjoyment of writing but also to enable them to develop and progress as real writers.

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Appendix 1: Self-assessment checklist

Grammar

Does my writing make sense?

Are my words in the right order?

Are there any sentences which seem too long?

Have I used the correct tenses? (present ("I am"), past ("I was"), future ("I will") etc)

Spelling

Have I corrected any spellings I know are wrong?

Have I checked spellings that I am not sure about?

Handwriting

Is my handwriting clear?

Is there a difference between upper and lower case letters?

Punctuation

Have I used different kinds of punctuation (e.g. full stops, commas, question marks, exclamation marks (!))?

Are capital letters and apostrophes in the right places?

Have I used quotation marks if I have taken something from the book or poem

Have I read my work out loud to check that I have put full stops in the right places?

Content

Who is my audience (my intended reader)? Is my language right for them?

Have I shown my knowledge of the reader and their work?

What is the purpose (reason for writing) and have I made my purpose clear?

Have I used the correct layout for the letter?

Have I organised my writing into paragraphs?

Do the paragraphs flow from one to the next?

Does the letter feel like it is organised and structured well, with my ideas put in a logical order?

Is anything missing? Should I cut anything out?

Is my writing interesting for the reader?

Can I change some boring words for more accurate and adventurous ones?

Do I need to add more details to develop my ideas so that my readers can see and believe what I am writing about?

Have I read my work out loud to check that the reader will understand my ideas?

Have I started my sentences in different ways?

Have I used long and short sentences?

Appendix 2: Questionnaire 1

WRITING QUESTIONNAIRE (Part 1)

This questionnaire has been designed as part of a research project for the University of Cambridge. Your responses will be analysed to find out what could help to improve young people's writing and their enjoyment of writing.

This is not a test and there are no right or wrong answers, so please be completely honest. All of the information you provide will remain confidential; if your answers are included in the research, a false name will be given so you can't be identified. You can decide not to participate if you do not want to.

1. **Do you think the writing you do in English lessons is important?** Yes/No (Please circle)

   Why/why not?...
   ....

2. **What do you enjoy about writing in English lessons?**
   ....
   ....
   ....

3. **What don't you like about writing in English lessons?**
   ....
   ....
   ....

4. **What would make writing in English lessons more enjoyable or interesting for you?**
   ....
   ....
   ....

5. Who normally reads the writing you do in English lessons?

………

……

6. Do you do any writing outside of school? Yes/No (Please circle)

If yes, what do you write?………………………………………………………………………………

………

………

7. What kind of things do you enjoy writing the most? (This can be anything; it doesn't have to be writing you do in school) List THREE (3) things.

1. ……………………………………………
2. ……………………………………………
3. ……………………………………………

8. If you thought that someone outside school might read your writing and respond to you about your work, would that change the way you felt about your writing? Yes/No (Please circle)

Why/why not?………………………………………………………………………………………

……

……

9. Do you always read over your writing? Yes/No (Please circle)

Why/why not?………………………………………………………………………………………

……

……

10. When you do read over your writing, what do you look for when you read it?

………

………

………

Thank you very much for taking the time to respond.

Appendix 3: Questionnaire 2

WRITING QUESTIONNAIRE (Part 2)

This questionnaire has been designed as part of a research project for the University of Cambridge. Your responses will be analysed to find out what could help to improve young people's writing and their enjoyment of writing.

This is not a test and there are no right or wrong answers, so please be completely honest. All of the information you provide will remain confidential; if your answers are included in the research, a false name will be given so you can't be identified. You can decide not to participate if you do not want to.

Name: ……………………………………………………………

1. **Did being able to choose your own author or poet make a difference to your attitude towards the writing task?** Yes/No (Please circle)

   If yes, what difference did it make? If no, why didn't it make a difference?
   ………
   ………
   ……

2. **Did researching the author or poet before the lesson help you to write the letter?** Yes/No (Please circle)

   If yes, how did it help you? If no, why didn't it help you?
   ………
   ………
   ……

3. **Did your attitude towards your writing change when you found out your letter was actually going to be sent off to the author or poet?** Yes/No (Please circle)

   If yes, how did your attitude change? If no, why didn't your attitude change?...
   ....
   ....

4. **When you found out that the letters were going to be sent off, did you do the self-assessment task differently from the first time you did it?** Yes/No (Please circle)

   If yes, what did you do that was different? Why?
   ....
   ....
   ....

5. **When you re-read your writing again in the second lesson, what did you look for when you read it?**
   ....
   ....
   ....

6. **Once you found out you were going to send your letter off, did you enjoy the writing task more, less, or about the same as in the first lesson?** More / less / about the same (Please circle)

   Why?...
   ....
   ....

7. **List three things which you think you have done well in your final letter.**

   1. ....
   2. ....
   3. ....

8. **Do you think knowing that you would be sending your letter off to a real person helped to improve your writing?** Yes/No (Please circle)

   If yes, how did it help to improve it? If no, why didn't it help to improve it?……

9. **Would you like to be able to do more writing in English lessons for real people outside of your class to read?** Yes/No (Please circle)

   Why / why not?………

   Thank you very much for taking the time to respond.