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RESEARCH REPORT

Writing to Learn: Exploring the impact of freewriting and diagraphing on teachers' continuous professional development and learning

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Abstract

Background and purpose: 'Writing to Learn' encompasses two strategies: freewriting (writing without stopping to correct or think for a set period of time; Elbow, 1998) and diagraphing (a neologism of diagrams, dialogue and art; Gilbert, 2022). This intervention sought to explore the ways in which sixth-form teachers and students might write and learn together within a supportive learning environment.

Aims: This research report seeks to explore the experiences of mid-career teachers trialling writing to learn strategies in their classrooms and for their own development.

Methods: The approach we used was practitioner inquiry set within a Teaching and Learning Community (TLC). The participants were self-selecting teachers and their students. The inquiry focused on trialling the use of writing to learn within the classroom and for teachers' professional development. Between July 2021 and May 2022, we took part in three workshops, online, at Goldsmiths University and at our college site, to develop our confidence in using writing to learn strategies. Starting in September 2022, a number of teachers trialled writing to learn strategies in our classes and with our peers. In summer 2023, six semi-structured interviews were carried out with self-selecting teachers who had trialled writing to learn either for their own development and/or with their classes. Additional data used included teachers' reflective notes, including freewriting and diagraphing from TLC meetings and whole college Professional Development (PD) days.

Key findings: Trialling writing to learn strategies improved motivation in relation to a greater sense of professional autonomy and helped cultivate a greater sense of freedom and creativity. Additional findings stressed the importance of creating a safe and trusting learning culture and tensions between a performative and learning culture.

Implications for practice: Writing to learn strategies have the potential to be a genuinely impactful tool for teachers' professional learning. Continuing to cultivate and nurture supportive and trusting learning environments is crucial to enable a healthy and organic research culture to develop. Whilst our research and evidence in this report focuses on teachers, our next research project will explore the impact of writing to learn on student experience and learning.

Keywords: freewriting; diagraphing; teaching and learning community; teacher-researchers, autonomy; trust; collaborative learning.

Motivation, focus and questions

We teach at a large, socially and ethnically diverse sixth form college in North London. When our students start at the college, many have a performative attitude to learning born out of an exam culture. The narrowness of GCSE specifications frequently leads students to assume there is a “right” answer, and they may lack ways of expressing themselves in critical analysis required for A-level. Linked to this, for many of our students, they will be the first in the family to go to university, hence as teachers we are mindful of the tension arising between ensuring students are fully prepared to succeed in exams alongside ensuring their deeper educational needs are met, inculcating a love of learning beyond the rigidity of exam specifications.

Many of our students struggle with writing and arguably suffer from ‘page fear,’ choosing to leave a page blank rather than answer a question and worry about getting it wrong. The highly rigorous nature of A-level study combined with a packed curriculum and high-level stakes of exams leaves little room for making mistakes, going off-*piste* and exploring a love of learning for its own sake. Alongside this, teachers are also caught in a restrictive deficit model with a focus on performance targets and data that can obstruct and undermine the pursuits of thinking and learning.

The ongoing practice of writing to learn is an attempt to tackle anxiety around writing through a more creative and freer process that shifts away from a performative culture and focuses on learning as a developmental, iterative and continuous process. In this way, writing to learn is a democratic process for all learners, regardless of student / teacher roles. This work is underpinned by the TLC’s commitment to education as the practice of freedom (hooks, 1994) and the act of writing, whilst done individually, feeds into wider communal endeavour.

Inquiry focus

The inquiry was carried out with teachers working with 16 - 19 year olds in a Further Education college in North London. It was cross-curricular, with teachers taking part from a range of A-level subjects including Biology, Business Studies, Drama, Economics, English Literature, EPQ, History, Maths, Music, P.E, Philosophy, Psychology, Politics and Sociology.

Relevant theory

In ‘Becoming Our Own Experts,’ Yandell (2024) cautions against the emphasis on teachers as recipients of research, advocating for them to become directly and intimately involved in driving research. This aligns with the ‘teacher as researcher’ model spearheaded by Stenhouse (1975). Over the past decade, our TLC has become a site of practitioner-research, drawing on the tenets laid out by Wenger’s Community of Practice model (1998).

‘Writing to learn’ strategies have two components: freewriting involves writing without stopping to correct or think, to help manifest and collect the writer’s thoughts (Elbow, 1998). Diagrarting is a neologism of dialogue, diagrams and art (Gilbert, 2022), a process in which writers doodle, draw, write and discuss ideas spontaneously. Incorporating Bolton’s work on Reflective Writing for Professional Development (2018), we sought to incorporate writing to learn strategies through trialling within our TLC before integrating with our classes. For example, in TLC meetings, we would freewrite and diagrart around a prompt question such as: ‘What do I want my classroom to look and feel like?’ or ‘What kind of educator do I want to be?’ This enabled us to experiment with the form for ourselves, before discussing and reflecting together on how it felt and how we might adapt to our own classroom settings. Carving out this time and space to ask probing questions about our professional identities and values also helped cultivate a coherent and communal set of values that underpin our work.

Research question and aims

Our research question was: ‘What are the experiences of mid-career teachers using writing to learn strategies with A-level students?’ Our aims were threefold:

1. To establish whether teachers perceived greater confidence and independence of thought in learners after using writing to learn strategies in their teaching
2. We sought to use our ongoing findings to encourage other teachers to trial writing to learn with their own classes and for their own personal and professional development
3. We also sought to raise the profile of writing to learn as an organic, peer-led form of continuous professional development, through trialling strategies in our TLC meetings, with a view to incorporate and embed in subject and departmental meetings and in whole-college PD days

Inquiry plan and activities

Initial training took place in July 2021 with two follow up workshops in May 2022, one at Goldsmiths and one whole-college PD at the sixth form college. From the start of the academic year in September 2022, writing to learn strategies were incorporated across a range of subjects, in TLC meetings and PD days, along with micro-writing to learn sessions for students and teachers writing together.

Each activity was specifically designed to align with relevant points within the academic year. For example, in our first TLC meeting of the year, we created a freewriting and diagrarting exercise responding to the question: ‘what does an anti-racist classroom look like?’ whilst in a whole college PD session, we incorporated the question: ‘what does a love of

learning look like?’ Similarly, when encouraging students to respond positively to coursework drafts, we initiated prompts such as: ‘what does good feedback look and feel like?’ and as part of the revision process, we organised micro freewriting exercises for students and teachers responding to the stimulus: ‘what does a good question look like?’

Each session also helped create greater momentum and impetus for a more agentic and participatory approach to the writing to learn project. In spring 2023, a group of teachers ran workshops modelling writing to learn within a community of practice environment at the LSRN and TEAN conferences in Birmingham and Manchester. In September 2023, a group of teachers presented our research findings at the BERA conference in Birmingham. Teachers have also published articles on the theme of teacher-academic collaborations (Gilbert et al, 2023) and, more recently, on developing writing to learn within a TLC (Bogard, Collicott and Hughes, 2025).

The range of activities and variety of outputs speaks to the organic nature of the project and the relative freedom experienced by teachers within the sixth form. This ability to use professional autonomy and judgement, both with when and how to trial writing to learn, reflects the nature of the intervention, which is deliberately open and non-restrictive, in order to encourage greater teacher agency over the process. Ultimately, the project took on a life of its own as rhizomatic connections (Fox & Alldred, 2015; Deleuze & Guattari, 2013) were made between different teachers and their students.

Ethical considerations and relationships

All students were told about the research project from the start and it was made clear that there was no expectation that they had to take part in the writing to learn activities. The activities themselves were done at a point when students felt safe and it was felt that sufficient trust had developed and been built up within the class.

Qualitative data was collected through six semi-structured interviews with teachers over the summer term in 2023. The interviews were self-selecting, in the knowledge that findings would be disseminated with a view to being published. Names were changed for anonymity, and extracts from transcripts were selected so that they did not identify any teacher. Transcripts were typed up over summer 2023 and a team of teachers used thematic analysis (Clark and Braun, 2021), identifying key themes and using these to structure the findings. Additional data was drawn from notes from teacher reflections, including diagraphing and freewriting, as well as notes from TLC meetings and whole college PD.

Findings

We identified four key themes:

1. The first was that writing to learn improved motivation, specifically in relation to a growing sense of autonomy.
2. Secondly, we found it helped cultivate a greater sense of freedom linked to creativity in the classroom.
3. Thirdly, we found that in order for writing to learn to be effective, it was essential to create a safe and trusting learning environment.
4. Fourth, we identified ongoing tensions between a learning and a performative culture.

Improved motivation: greater sense of professional autonomy

A major finding of this project was that taking part in writing to learn strategies improved teachers' motivations in different regards. It is important to recognise that this change of motivation comes from teachers self-reporting rather than a motivation scale. This reflects the qualitative focus of the project that seeks to draw out and validate teachers' experiences on their own terms.

Some teachers reported becoming much more motivated to write and express themselves on the page, and this impacted upon their practice as teachers. They felt they were able to introduce freewriting and diagraphing into their lessons and, on some occasions, in peer-led teacher development sessions, writing alongside both students and colleagues. Not all teachers took up writing to learn strategies in their own practice as writers, but did use them as pedagogical strategies in their own teaching.

In relation to an increased sense of professional autonomy, all participants spoke of the ways in which they had adapted and incorporated writing to learn strategies in their own classrooms, and how they were able to demonstrate professional judgement in the ways these strategies were employed. For example, freewriting became a useful mechanism for curriculum development and design, as seen through the reflections of Gemma, an English teacher:

Gemma: I do a lot of stuff on growth mindset...I would give them their mock back, focus on the importance of the feedback, do general class feedback, give them time to improve it and then ask them to write a letter to themselves about their feeling, their experience; what they're going to do between now and the exam

For Gemma, her ability to encourage the students to reflect on their work, without becoming potentially distracted or disillusioned by a grade was key here, with writing to learn being strategically employed ('write a letter to themselves') to encourage time and space both to reflect and improve, developing a different, less deferential relationship with assessment and feedback processes.

This idea of regular reflective practice was also highlighted by Nikita, an Economics teacher, in the following extract:

Nikita: I feel like when you start the practice of teaching, it goes out the window. But I think it's useful to do that and reflect on your delivery, your lesson planning, your resources. And I think it could be useful there...But then when you become a fully-fledged teacher, with the timetable... we just forget to do that. And it is useful.

Another participant, Yas, a Biology teacher, spoke about autonomy in relation to incorporating anti-racist practices into her teaching:

Yas: With the decolonization and anti-racism that was a lot more personal so that was more like my thoughts and feelings and more where it fits into education in this setting... it was more like where have I seen it? What do I think about it? What do I do about it?

There are a number of important points that emerge from this data. Firstly, it was increasingly clear from these extracts that, whilst embedded in specific subjects, writing to learn strategies have been used effectively across disciplines, suggesting that writing to learn has the potential to help both students and teachers to develop in their learning trajectories across curriculum areas and settings.

Secondly, as discussed at the start, the pedagogy underpinning writing to learn, in which teachers take part in the practice for their own learning and development, has an important role to play here. In this case, a teacher's ability to reflect on their own learning and become more confident as a critically reflective practitioner (Brookfield, 2017) can benefit students who can also be encouraged to reflect on their learning in order to improve.

Greater sense of freedom and creativity

The writing to learn strategies offered a new way of thinking about pedagogy and writing for the teachers involved in the project. They offered the chance for more creativity and freedom. This creativity and freedom was twofold: both in the nature of the intervention itself, in that teachers were encouraged to freewrite and diagraph for themselves prior to trialling with learners, and consequently the ways in which this was trialled in the classroom. In terms of teachers freewriting and diagraphing for themselves, this is illustrated in the following quote from Joe, a Philosophy teacher:

Joe: There was a moment we did a free writing exercise and something kind of emerged through just the junk that I was writing...and as I was writing I started actually asking some questions about why I was really doing it...And the answer to those questions came through in the writing...And if I could have a little moment where I have to ask myself a question and really focus on it and then try and come to an answer on the page then maybe students would as well.

This is an interesting observation as it suggests how the act of freewriting creates space ('a little moment') to think more deeply and see where the pen takes you ('something kind of emerged'). Rather than students answering questions set by a textbook, teacher or exam, Joe saw the process of coming up with questions and trying to answer them oneself as an autonomous creative task that could benefit self-directed learning.

The freedom to explore and experiment can be seen in the following quote from David, a Maths teacher:

Diagrarting is probably a better tool...to construct your own problems because there's something freer about it and the point about learning to construct your own problems is that it still has enough definition within the curriculum limits that I'm trying to operate within and also just to experiment or explore

This sense of experimentation can also be seen in this quote from Nikita, an Economics teacher:

Nikita: So I think for me, I saw it as a creative task, an artistic task, a form of expression without any boundaries and worry...I think there's always policies and data that they have to learn. And this for me was an opportunity where if you've got your own ideas: bring it in. If it was a policy and you don't agree with it and you think there's a better policy, you put it in. So I saw it as more of a chance for them to be creative...'

This quote illustrates the ways in which freedom and creativity have helped participants feel freed up to encourage writing to learn with their students as a way to critically engage with the curriculum.

From these quotes, it is interesting to consider how writing to learn strategies could be incorporated as part of an ongoing professional development programme, in which teachers are encouraged to regularly freewrite and diagrart as part of a subject or pastoral meeting in order to develop their own critical engagement. Through experience and understanding, these techniques could then be adapted, incorporated and embedded into classroom practice.

Creating a safe and trusting learning environment

Linked to both ideas of autonomy and freedom, all the participants discussed the importance of creating a safe and trusting learning environment in order to trial writing to learn. The emphasis on teachers freewriting and diagrarting for themselves was important as it brought a recognition and awareness of the vulnerability that can be exposed during this process. In their interviews, both David (Maths) and Gemma (English) were highly conscious of their own role in the classroom space and their attempts, through disruption and invisibility respectively, to create an environment whereby the learners felt safe and in control of their learning:

David: *I have seen too much conflation between authority of a subject and authority in the classroom and therefore an absolute blind panic when they make a mistake because it comes across as undermining authority ... and if you make mistakes all the time it makes it much more democratic ... diagraphing's great because it's impossible to be wrong ...*

Gemma: *what I'm doing during that time is trying to suggest a complete disappearance of myself. I try and be very busy with something in a corner (laughs)... most of the time I'm wandering around the class looking at their stuff but that's what they expect me to be doing ... so I like to create the illusion of privacy ... I think you're much more sensitive to the proximity of an adult at that stage than adults necessarily remember ... so you don't want to be too near them when they're doing something private...'*

For David, it was important to shift away from notions of hierarchy and authority ('make mistakes all the time'), who saw this as encouraging more of an equal learning culture, where mistakes were welcome in order for new ideas to be developed ('more democratic'). Similarly, for Gemma, the recognition of the power dynamics were important to the process of freewriting, and her attempt to remove herself from the space ('a complete disappearance of myself') was an important acknowledgement on the need for learners to feel secure enough to freewrite knowing that their privacy was being respected.

In terms of trust, a key point that emerged in the interviews was the relationship between students and teacher, and the importance of cultivating a mutually respectful and trusting learning environment. This notion of mutual reciprocity is also underpinned by the pedagogy of writing to learn and the expectation that this is something teachers will do for themselves and with each other, as well as with their students. This is exemplified in the following quote:

Joe: *I think if they don't trust you (pause)... if they don't trust that you're offering them something that you are really confident will be useful.. it's not so much the trust in you as a person or as a teacher, but it's that they trust that you trust this...And that they trust that you have confidence in this thing. And they can go well, it seems pointless, but this person who seems like a competent human being... this competent adult seems to have a lot of faith in this thing...I'll give it a go.*

It was precisely this 'let's give it a go' mindset that we were seeking to encourage, helping students to embrace a developmental and open approach to learning.

Tensions between a learning and a performative culture

All the participants discussed student anxiety around writing and the fact this was continually linked to assessment and judgement. One key theme that we identified in the interviews was the importance of the teacher in guiding their students away from a performance culture towards something more learning-orientated. This represented a

genuine challenge, as the aspect of freedom associated with writing to learn posed a threat, with learners worried that they would be exposed, even though the private nature of the endeavour was emphasised in classes. Yas, a Biology teacher, discusses student anxiety in this quote:

Yas: My students, are afraid of writing...I tend to find at the beginning of year 12 and for some reason there are some students who have no problem and no fear with writing their thoughts down. But I find students in this setting have page fear really badly.

The following extract demonstrates teachers' attempts to navigate and overcome this performance anxiety:

Nikita: they took a bit of time to start and...they were so conscious of not saying the wrong thing or not writing the wrong thing. They kept putting their hands up, some of them: 'Is this right? Is this right?'...'No, but it doesn't matter.' To go from an environment where they're trained: 'you have to write like this' and 'this is what you have to do to get a particular skill or a particular mark' to then just go to the free writing...it took a bit of time to adjust.

This idea was corroborated by Leon, a P.E. teacher, who sought to use writing to learn strategies to give his students confidence in approaching exams:

... What I don't want them doing in an exam is being nervous and not quite sure and just leaving the question. So if they're willing to just give it a go in class, hopefully in an exam they're willing to just give it a go and then they can just mop up whatever they can and that's better than just a zero.

As per Joe's quote in the previous section, this willingness to 'just give it a go' emphasises the importance of feeling free; in order for the student to feel this sense of freedom, it seems important that teachers feel their own sense of freedom and empowerment. This was not a given, and arguably providing peer support through the TLC, alongside academic input and expertise within a relationship of mutual reciprocity and respect, enabled teachers to support their students to feel unburdened and willing to take risks in experimenting with how they learn.

One interesting additional point that we identified from the interviews connected to this was the private and public nature of freewriting. Whilst the practice itself is private, and this is an important part of the process emphasised to students, some participants also spoke of the potential for sharing, with Gemma speaking about 'something in the writing they can then bring the whole group forward.' This suggests there might be a false dichotomy between the private and public spheres, with elements of writing that might have started out as a private freewrite becoming something that can be shared as a way of developing collaborative learning. This is an area that we would be keen to explore in further research with our students.

Reflective evaluation on the process

In terms of supportive conditions, a genuinely authentic, peer-led Community of Practice plays an important role as both motivating force and reflective space for teacher-researchers to develop. Away from prescriptive and controlled measures that often characterise institutionally-driven CPD, the community model disrupts this form (Bogard, Cox-Willmott and Hart, 2026) and creates space for a different form of working predicated on being prepared to make mistakes, learning together and alongside students in a spirit of openness and therefore potential vulnerability. What is clear is the importance of a different kind of professional development which is classroom-based, with those in positions of authority providing institutional support to further develop practitioner-research to enable students and teachers to collaborate in peer-driven partnerships.

In relation to limitations of the research, without systematic data collection, it is difficult to know the impact on students. A follow-up research question could look at experiences of students over time, including potentially a longitudinal study looking at students involved in writing to learn now at university (and beyond) to see the extent to which there might be a long-lasting impact.

Next steps

In terms of next steps, our main focus is to carry out research into students' experiences of writing to learn, both in and out of the classroom. Reflecting on the findings, there is some interesting evidence to suggest students might have felt initially unsettled by the ethos of writing to learn, with its emphasis on privacy and writing deliberately not being given in or marked. Whilst this might have caused frustration to start with, it would be useful to speculate on the extent to which this changes over time, as students (and teachers) become more familiar and adept with freewriting.

This would be an interesting follow-up area of research. A series of focus groups could be a useful way of capturing ideas, potentially being carried out at different points across the two years to reflect the potentially changing relationship with the process. Student-led focus groups could enable the research to be more of a collaboration with students, with a view that the findings could be written up together: teacher and student-researchers working on a shared collaborative project (Gilbert et al, 2023). This could potentially be led by students familiar with carrying out research as part of their A-level studies such as Social Scientists or those carrying out original research as part of their Extended Project Qualification. This would help build a wider body of student-researchers alongside teacher-researchers within a student learning community.

In terms of feedback and the sharing of findings, we were delighted to recently publish an article in *Impact*, the journal for the Chartered College of Teachers (Bogard, Collicott and

Hughes, 2025) that shared our reflections, with the hope that this might encourage other teachers to trial writing to learn in their own classes and as part of their own professional development. Feedback on this work has been positive, with teachers from our institution and beyond reflecting on the empowering opportunities of writing to learn and the ways in which it supports teachers to become more confident in their own writing abilities, which in theory can be impactful both in the classroom and our own development. We have found these strategies to be particularly effective in our post-16 setting due to the specific challenges and opportunities of working with this age group. We invite teachers from all key stages to experiment with writing to learn and adapt to their own settings, and would welcome the opportunity to collaborate further.

Writing to learn has also empowered us in other ways, too. For example, two of the authors have recently contributed a chapter to the BERA guide on Decolonising the Curriculum (Hart and Hughes, 2024) and the BERA guide to Practitioner Research (Bogard, Cox-Willmott and Hart, 2025). This suggests that giving ourselves permission to think and work in different ways that are more meaningful, relevant and appropriate for learning has wider implications for our professional identities and careers.

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