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A conversation with Ralph Fletcher: Writer and teacher of writing

Ralph Fletcher[1] with Jan Turbill

Background to conversation our conversation

In July 2014 Ralph Fletcher was invited by ALEA and PETAA to present the Donald Graves Address at the ALEA/AATE National Conference in Darwin, NT. It was an inspiring talk, filled with stories about writing and the writer. Intertwined within the stories Ralph presented his audience with key messages about the teaching of writing. Capturing such an inspiring talk as a chapter in a book was going to be a challenge until we came up with the idea of Ralph talking to his readers. After jointly designing key questions that both Ralph and I felt would best capture these messages, we chatted via Skype across the world – Ralph in Portsmouth NH USA in his evening time and me in Shoalhaven Heads in NSW, Australia in my morning time. What fun we had! Even my dog got into the act! The Skype chat was transcribed and sent to Ralph who happily did an edit, tightening and adding where needed. My role has been to carefully work through the original oral conversation and cut-and-paste, add and delete in order to weave together Ralphs' key thoughts and ideas, his 'gems' into a coherent chapter: *A Conversation with Ralph Fletcher.*

The conversation begins

Jan: Thanks Ralph for making the time to chat. Let's begin with you telling us a little of your professional background.

Ralph: Sure. In the field of teaching writing, it seems like there are two kinds of people. There are wonderful teachers who learned a lot about

1 Ralph Fletcher presented the Donald Graves Address at the ALEA/AATE National Conference in Darwin in 2014, jointly sponsored by ALEA and the Primary English Teaching Association Australia (PETAA).

writing. Linda Rief is one that comes to mind but there are many others. And then there are also writers who learned a lot about teaching. I always say that I'm kind of the latter category; I was a writer and I realised that maybe I had something to add to this field as a writer. My background: I always liked to write. I like to tell students now that I was never the best writer in the class, but I enjoyed doing it (although I had bad handwriting). After finishing high school, I went to university, took an English degree, studied literature but also took as many writing classes as I could, worked with as many writers as I could. After I graduated I worked as a freelance writer for about six or eight years.

When I was about 28 I went back to get my Masters in writing at Columbia University in New York and that's when I happened to walk across the street and there was a woman named Lucy Calkins who had just started teaching at Teachers College Graduate School at Columbia. I took her first class on teaching and writing. At that point I continued working on my own as a writer and working freelance but I also started working in some of the New York City classrooms as a member of the Teachers College Writing Project. I worked there for five years before venturing off on my own.

Jan: Looking back then, from that period to now, what would you say would be the 'gems' or key messages we need to know about the teaching of writing; gems that we have learned and we can't afford to lose?

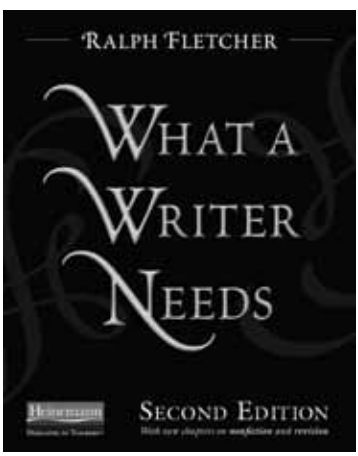
Ralph: Thinking about that, I realised it's always hard to collapse key messages into a couple of things but I'll just tell you my own core values about teaching writing. First of all, I think that Don Graves was right when he said, 'All children can write.' And I think that we have to be kind of generous when we use the word 'writing' when we say, 'All children can write.' It doesn't look the same for each kid. There's a range of abilities, but I think that that urge to put something down on the paper to communicate something is universal. I also think that the constructivists had it right when they said that kids learn by doing. The best environment is a place where students can write a lot. In this way they kind of teach themselves. I always tell teachers, 'It's not so much that we teach kids how to write. I

really think that what we do is we create an environment where they can teach themselves'.

That may seem a little bit non-rigorous by today's standards but that's what I believe. I think good teachers create a space where kids can learn by doing. I also think – and Graves talked about this – that kids need choice in writing. I believe that a good language arts classroom has four components: first, kids are reading together, being read to and/or reading to each other; and second they're doing individual reading. Third they're writing together – you know, occasionally there's a class writing experience, but lastly there's also lots of individual writing. I think this latter fourth component, choice in writing, is really important. Unfortunately many teachers give kids more choice in reading than in writing.

Choice in writing is being eroded. To teachers' defence, I suppose they feel that there's so much they have to teach that they get overwhelmed. Testing is a factor, too; I think that the whole idea of a test is that we want kids to write to the same prompt and so we feel like we need to get kids to be practising that a lot. Here in the US we still seem to be in a pretty strong 'test-crazy' era. I keep waiting for it to abate but it hasn't yet.

I also think that how we respond to young writers is very important. I had a professor at college. I went back and saw him years later and I told him about my work with young writers. He said that he'd come to the conclusion in his college classes that … you work best when you are one-on-one with the student. He called it a 'laying on of hands'. I think that, that part of the writing classroom where the teacher meets with the student one-on-one is so important. During this time there should be a balance of support and encouragement but also that little nudge to help the student go to the next place. It's like everything else; I think some teachers are really good at it and some teachers have to learn to do it better. It doesn't come naturally to everybody.

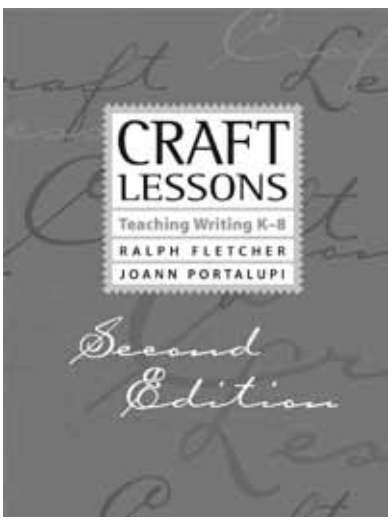


Jan: Mm hmm. In your workshop you talked about that a lot and you gave some

suggestions about the nature of the feedback or response that we should give our students.

Ralph: There are whole books on conferring but I think that it starts with finding something they're doing well and naming it for them in specific terms. That's very important. I think some teachers skip over that stage but I always tell them, 'You can grow strong writers if you do almost nothing more than go around and show them places in their own writing that's working well, and explain *why* so they can claim it for themselves'.

There's a trend nowadays to make those conferences very content-rich – little teaching times. I understand that inclination but I worry about it, too. If it's not a real and sincere dialogue, if basically we are just teeing them up for our teaching point – well, students learn quickly that this is not a real conversation and they tune out. Not all conferences lead to great fireworks; sometimes you're simply building a portrait of that kid. That's valuable. A writing conference is a conversation that continues all year long. Good teachers are really learning about their students so that ultimately, you know, like I'm going to use a little graphic here if I may … we have a conference with a kid and we give that kid a strategy so that's like a tool to try but if you know the kid really well, you've got like a container you can keep adding to for that kid. The strategies and challenges you put forth in a conference should fit into that container, so it adds up to something useful. Otherwise, a writing conference can be kind of random, you know.



When I look back on the people who have had a big impact on me; from Donald Graves to Don Murray to Lucy Calkins to Nancie Atwell – it seems to me all these educators embrace the writing conference. But you can survive without a writing conference too, you know. I never had writing conferences when I was a young writer.

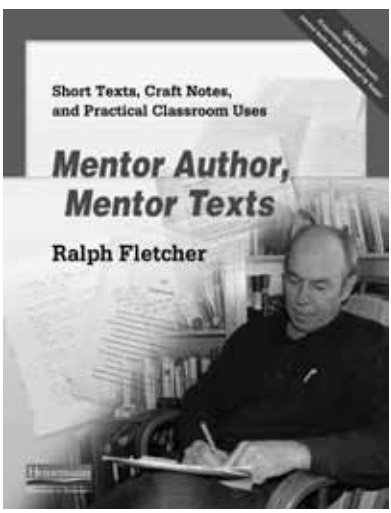
Jan: Yes, that's an interesting point. I don't

think I had that until I was well into my 30s and that's when I discovered, 'Oh, I can do this. I can write'.

Ralph: Yes, it's humbling. The writing process movement has tried to demystify writing and show kids the invisible 'steps' from the initial concept to the finished piece. I think that there's value in that. But Jan, as Don Graves said, we also have to watch out for orthodoxy. Even though we talk about different aspects of the writing process, I think it's important that we don't try and shoehorn each kid into the same rigid step-by-step process.

Jan: Let's move on to a third question, Ralph. You've written about mentor texts and you talked about this a lot at your workshop. I became very excited about that because I think there's a real value in the use of a mentor text. I particularly like your take on it. Would you share your thoughts about the importance of mentor texts for writers?

Ralph: Yes. I think that you could make the argument that the writing in a classroom can only be as good as the literature and the writing that supports and surrounds and buoys it up. Books give us horizons: something to shoot for. They make it real. If you want to do something well, you have to look at examples of other people who do it well, whether in sports, cooking, music, or writing. I think that kids get a lot out of reading books and being exposed to literature or 'mentor texts'. We can also call them 'exemplars', or 'models'. Mentor texts has become kind of a shorthand that we all understand.



In the *Craft Lesson* books we talk about craft elements or craft opportunities for making use of language in books as examples for students of what makes good writing. I think that what made me a good writer was just feeling the force of a good book, you know. That can't be over-estimated enough. It's great to have

somebody, an author or fellow writer, doing something well and cleverly and using a great metaphor or a turn of phrase or that kind of thing, but ultimately we have to help most kids connect to books that really impact them and rock their worlds. I think that's an initial kind of mentoring before we even get into the finer points of the writing itself.

We're social creatures, and children are lovely and wonderful and quirky, but having said that, I think that teachers also yearn for people their own age, other adults to talk to and share with. As a teacher you're oftentimes away from other adults. I think a good teacher can have a lot of impact on kids' writing but many teachers have said to me that teaching is lonely. There is usually no other adult in that classroom to bounce off. So an author's text is like having a fellow teacher in the room.

I think that mentor texts make a teacher's job less lonely because they're basically working with the writer in the room. You know, I have had several teachers tell me, 'Ralph, your book *Marshfield Dreams,* I feel like it's like a co-teacher. Like I'm there in that classroom but you're there with me too'. And I think that's really powerful in lots of different ways. I don't mean to be self-serving because you can use any other example but I think what's kind of cool is that the kids were seeing their own teacher being impacted by and also learning from this book.

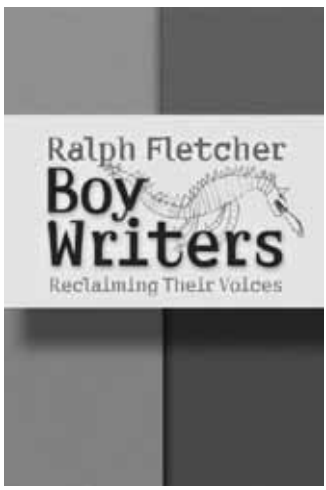
So, I think that it's a very rich thing – the use of good literature. I guess the last thing I just want to say is that we have to be willing to be generous and to realise that not all texts we read or use will meet every kid's interests in the classroom. We need to read them lots of things but we shouldn't be surprised if some books are much more accessible and inspiring to certain kids and some aren't.

Jan: Yes, that's really important. I think when you shared your understandings of using mentor texts in your workshop, it really resonated with the work that I'm doing with Grade 5, 6 kids in our book club. I love the way you speak about not just the text, but bringing the author of that text into the classroom. I think this focus is quite different from how other writers have written about the use of mentor texts. I love the idea of the book's author being a 'co-teacher'.

Well, let's move on to your interest in the writing of boys which I think is

an extremely important area in both our countries. And again, I was very taken with what you had to say and the work that you've been doing in this area right now.

Ralph: Yes, well thanks Jan. There's a lot of evidence that boys are struggling in writing. I mean you can look at test scores which are dramatic; this is one area where tests will show you a huge discrepancy between the ways boys score and girls score. I find that really interesting because there's no intrinsic reason why it has to be that way. In fact, many teachers will tell me that some of their very best writers are boys in the classroom but, as a whole, it seems like the boys oftentimes are not as excited about writing as the girls are.



My book *Boy Writers* started with that question. I've been learning from watching kids, interviewing kids, talking to teachers, trying to figure out why it is that boys are struggling. I think there are a couple of reasons; one of the reasons is that the writing classroom doesn't often tap into boys' tendencies or their own strengths. I mean it's a very passive setting. I didn't say this in my workshop but I think that maybe boys might thrive on a little bit more of a kinetic atmosphere, more moving around. Personally I'm an exception in that I'm the kind of guy that can sit down and write, but a lot of times boys find it to be kind of torturous.

Also I think that perhaps we value a certain kind of writing, especially in writing workshop; we tend to value the confessional poet. A few years ago there was an article by Brenda Power in *Language Arts* about writing workshop that put forth that idea. I think that we have celebrated a certain kind of confessional, feelings-based, sincere writing. And some of the boy writing that may be more ironic or violent or less emotional hasn't been appreciated as it should. It's worth noting that elementary teachers are about 90% female. When I give my little talk about this I'm usually talking to a room full of women, but I have to say that teachers are nodding at me,

and a lot of them realise that we're not doing a good enough job to connect with the boys.

The political discourse in the US, it's almost point, counter-point – if the girls are up here right now and the boys are down here, somebody might misinterpret the idea that I want to push the boys up and push the girls down. That cannot be further from the case. Girls have their own struggles in writing but if girls, as a whole, are doing well that's wonderful. But I think that boys represent a struggling population in writing achievement.

In my book, *Boy Writers*, I look at some of the curricular choices in the writing calendars we create. I suggest that perhaps we could try to make it not favour boys but maybe a little boy-friendlier because there are a lot of genres that boy writers really do enjoy but oftentimes we don't think to include them.

Jan: Yes, I've seen that happening here in classrooms. Again, in the book club, the kids do some free writing for 4–5 minutes towards the end of the hour. They then share with each other. One of the boys started to always write making sure that he had the word 'cheese' in his writing regardless of the broad topic I gave them. He would somehow weave 'cheese' in and as soon as he got up to read all the kids would go – 'Okay, here comes *cheese*' – and they loved it. And of course he kept doing it to please his audience. I've seen it happen with several of the other boys too that they start to play around with language and irony and so on, and if they can get a laugh out of their audience, they're right, they're away and they love it.

Ralph: I know we have to be careful about these generalisations. But one teacher once said to me, 'The girls will write for the teacher, the boys like to write for each other.' Yes, that rings true. Although there are a lot of times of course when that's not true, girls do write for each other etc., but I think that what you said is the boys knew their audience and how to get a laugh out of it. Part of understanding and teaching the boys better is to try to understand them better and in a neutral way. I think a lot of times we quickly want to – and I do this too sometimes in my own life in certain things – we quickly want to categorise something as 'good' or 'bad' or a 'strength' or a 'weakness' and maybe with the boys we could take a more

neutral stance: 'Isn't that interesting that they do that?' It's neither good nor bad; it's an aspect of them.

Jan: Ralph sadly our time is up. It has been so generous of you to share what you believe to be your 'gems' of writing and the teaching of writing. I was fortunate to hear you speak many years ago at a conference in the US. I came away then excited with so many ideas to try with the teachers with whom I was working and their children. Your work with boy writers, I think is exciting and so needed right now. I look forward to more books on this topic. Critical too is that our writer-learners (and their teachers) understand how the authors they read can teach the craft of writing. And feedback that teaches, confirms and 'grows' writers is indeed a gem that we need to rescue from our past. So many gems Ralph from a wonderful writer and teacher of writing. Our heartfelt thanks! Come back to Australia soon.

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Acknowledgements

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