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English teaching and imagination: a case for re-visiting the value of imagination in teaching writing.

Baroness Warnock once stated that it is "the cultivation of imagination which should be the chief aim of education" (Warnock, 1976:9). Despite this, mainstream education in England has not embraced imagination as an aim; imagination has, in fact, been neglected (Hughes, 1988) and its influence meagre (Sutton-Smith, 1988). This could be for a number of reasons, including considerable problems with defining the term (McGinn, 2004; Roth, 2007) and its associations with fanciful, even irresponsible, thinking (Smith, 1992; Baldachinno, 2009), particularly in an age dominated by positivist discourse (Heath, 2008). However, this paper argues that there are valid reasons for re-visiting Warnock's claim about imagination, and to do so from the perspective of teachers, particularly in the context of teaching writing.

In exploring issues regarding imagination and teaching writing, I will draw on the work of philosopher Maxine Greene, whose misgivings about standardised curricula and belief that teaching must be authentic and meaningful have resonance in the current climate. In particular, Greene's passionate commitment to imagination in education and her belief that it is "as important in the lives of teachers as it is in the lives of their students" (1995: 36) will be used as a starting point to open dialogue on the topic. Whilst Greene, an American philosopher, is an acknowledged influence in the United States "on the way English teachers *think* about the work they do" (Grahams, 1998: 212, author's italics), she has had less impact on English teaching in England. I suggest, however, that she has much to contribute to the conversation about teaching writing. To make this case, it is first necessary to outline the current climate in education in which teachers of writing work.

Cogs or accomplices? **Teaching writing in the current educational landscape**

How is [a teacher] to avoid feeling like a chess piece or a cog or even an accomplice of some kind? (Greene, 1995: 11)

Working in the United States in the second half of the twentieth, and early twenty-first, centuries, Greene was an opponent of standardised curricula, which she saw as dominated by "officials who...take for granted that the schools' main mission is to meet national economic and technical needs" (Greene, 1995: 9). Greene felt this put teachers at risk of becoming powerless "subjects of a remote authority" (Greene, 1973: 5), which, like DeLillo's "noxious cloud" in his novel *White Noise*, is "nameless...odorless...ubiquitous" (Greene, 1995: 45). In England in the 1980s there were similar concerns about standardisation, and when the National Curriculum was introduced in 1989, it provoked some disquiet in the English teaching community. It was seen as an ideological imposition (Davies, 1996) and an attack on professional autonomy (Harrison, 1994), both of which constituted a real threat to the culture of the English classroom, which valued pupils' *personal growth* (Goodwyn, 2010) and sought to provide pupils with "the opportunity to reveal themselves as they actually *are*" (Harrison, 1994: xii).

In terms of teaching writing, the English teaching community's commitment to nurturing pupils' personal growth is significant. Valuing personal development seems to acknowledge the widely-recognised link between writing, personal identity and meaning-making (Sartre, 1947; Smith, 1982; Cremin & Myhill, 2012) as well as conceding that good writing draws on experiences, emotions and ideas as much as knowledge of grammatical structures and linguistic techniques. However, since the introduction of the National Curriculum, and the accountability measures that have followed, English teachers have been increasingly subject to what Fisher (2011) describes as a "third voice", which sets "...the educational goal and direct[s] the discussion" (p. 91); an outside determinant which cannot accommodate a goal as nuanced or nebulous as *personal growth*. This "indirect governance" (Bagley & Beach,

2015: 427), exerts pressure on teachers in an ideological framework that has been variously described as performativity (Ball, 2003; Hall & McGinity, 2015), "educationomics" (Stronach, 2010, quoted in Clarke & Moore, 2013: 487) or neoliberalism (Davies, 2005; Ball & Olmedo, 2012; Parr et al, 2015). No matter how it is defined, it is recognisable in the way that it limits teachers' creative or risk-taking practice (Kwek, Albright & Kramer-Dahl, 2007; Steers, 2013), curtails professional autonomy (Wood, 2014) and breeds high levels of compliance (Clarke & Moore, 2013; Hall & McGinity, 2015) - and this despite troubling and significant undercurrents of unease (Wood, 2014; Sheikh & Bagley, 2018). A noxious cloud, indeed, and one which threatens important professional understandings about teaching writing and its relationship to pupils' personal growth.

A pertinent example of this can be found in Anderson's (2013) article *Exploring the Island: Mapping the Shifting Sands in the Landscape of English Classroom Culture and Pedagogy*. In the article, Anderson describes her experience of observing a novice English teacher using a set of resources familiar to her called *The Island*, which were created before the inception of the National Curriculum. The original resources had been exciting to teach, engaging pupils in a range of tasks, like: imagining the island's highest point and writing a poem about it; telling stories around a campfire; writing a list of rules and punishments and enacting the trial of someone caught breaking them (ibid: 114). Anderson's dismay is palpable as she describes the way this approach has changed and the sequence of banal tick-box exercises she observes is worth briefly recounting here. First, pupils match descriptive techniques to their definitions ('repetition of key words' matched to 'repeating words') before being asked to spot these in a contrived piece, written by the teacher to ensure full coverage of these techniques. Following this, pupils attempt their own descriptive passage, writing for just five minutes before books are swapped for peer assessment: pupils mark each other's writing on the basis of how many techniques are evident (Level 6 only being possible if five or six techniques are used). Whilst Anderson notes that most pupils

"gamely" attempt all the activities, she is drawn to one pupil, Harry, who enters the lesson excited about his homework (his map of his imagined island) and who becomes quickly frustrated when he realises this is not important to the teacher. In the end, he leaves disheartened and perhaps wondering as much as Anderson: who was this lesson for?

One of the most telling observations Anderson makes about this lesson is that it is well-received by the student's more experienced mentor. This speaks to my sense that the student teacher's learning sequence, and the motivation behind it "that prescribed teaching objectives are covered" (Grainger, 2005: 76) and that learning is measured and evidenced (Wood, 2014), is as familiar now as the original *Island* resources were to Anderson nearly 30 years ago. I argue, as others have previously (see Goodwyn, 2012), that since curriculum standardisation, English teaching culture has shifted away from valuing pupils' *personal growth* and towards *"promoting pupil progress"* (DfE, 2011: 10). This change is not insubstantial: whilst it would be hard to deny that promoting pupil progress is a significant part of any teacher's job, it cannot encompass less measurable educational aims like moral growth, emotional wellbeing or aesthetic appreciation as personal growth can. Much to teachers' despair (Ball, 2003; Wood, 2014), English teaching culture is shrinking to accommodate only that which can be assessed (Bleiman, 2018) as performance management frameworks leave discomfited teachers with little room for manoeuver. Is it any wonder, then, that Anderson's student teacher focused on what she could easily measure and, in doing so, failed to consider the rich possibilities that *The Island* resources offer for pupils' writing development and personal growth?

One of the many effects of assessment-focused English teaching is that it risks pupil disengagement. Unfortunately, there is evidence that this might be developing into a real problem, as recent survey results indicate that take-up of English 'A' level is down by around 20% (Bleiman, 2018), with inevitable consequences for tertiary English and the supply of

English teachers in the future. There is good reason, therefore, for the English teaching community to engage in dialogue about principles and priorities of school English *beyond* assessment. For my part, I am reminded of Dewey's (1934) conviction that without *imagination* "there is only recurrence, complete uniformity; the resulting experience is routine and mechanical" (p. 272) and, feeling the truth in this, wish to explore the idea that a higher value should be placed on imagination in the teaching of writing. I do this to generate ideas rather than offer recommendations for practice, although I advance some practical suggestions towards the end of this paper in the hope they will be used as a starting point for departmental discussions.

Imagination and teaching: the philosophical context

Imagination is a difficult concept to pin down. For both Kant and Hume, it is universal, held by "children, peasants and the greatest part of mankind" (Hume, 1888 quoted in Hansen, 1988: 133), responsible for imposing coherence and constancy on the fragments of sense data received by the brain. In this conception of it, imagination is responsible for no less than our fundamental sense of reality (Warnock, 1976; Hansen, 1988). Likewise, Coleridge connects imagination with our perception of reality but adds the secondary imagination, which is our poetic use of this perception (Warnock, 1976); the idea of 'fancy' is one that persists in general understanding of the term. Heath (2008) offers a similar distinction between two types of imagination: the 'inventive', which we use to imagine what is not present, and the 'radical', which we use to imagine completely new versions of the world (the latter is the more advanced skill, responsible for transforming consciousness). Furlong (1961), however, finds imagination in more workaday pursuits. He makes a distinction between being 'in' imagination and acting 'with' imagination, the latter being the way that anyone, footballer as much as musician, can deploy imagination in their work. For Egan & Nadamer (1988), imagination is fundamental to learning and cognition, "... not some

desirable but dispensable frill" (p. ix), and Smith (1992) claims it is "the dynamo of the brain" (p. 54).

Through reviewing the literature on imagination, I have identified three themes which I think can contribute to the dialogue on the teaching of writing. I have organised these themes into domains, and they are: the *aesthetic* domain, the *cognitive* domain, and the *affective* domain. Each is distinct, although there are inevitable areas of overlap, and through them I aim to map out a theoretical terrain which could be useful for practice.

Teacher as artist - the aesthetic domain

"Encounters with the arts…can nurture the growth of persons who will reach out to one another as they seek clearings in their experience and try to be more ardently in the world" (Greene, 1995: 132)

The language of policy documents, like the Programmes of Study (DfE, 2013) or the Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2011), positions a teacher as a "deliverer" of the curriculum, "less as an engaged collaborative professional who learns through a combination of theory and practice, and more as an agentless functionary" (Parr et al, 2015: 134). As the language is "...a language without human provenance or possibility" (Davies, 2005: 15) it cannot encompass emotional and social aspects of teaching or learning and "appears to reject disagreement or discussion" (Clarke & Moore, 2013: 490). Indeed, the language is confident and instructive; requiring that pupils "be taught to...write accurately, fluently, effectively" (DoE, 2013: 5) and that teachers "demonstrate knowledge and understanding of how pupils learn" (DoE, 2011: 10) - constructing a (false) reality in which "how pupils learn" is straightforward and eminently knowable. In Foucauldian terms, this discourse constitutes educational "objects" (pupil, teacher) that are fixed, frozen; like Pinar's (1981) "smooth" educational researcher whose words are the linguistic "equivalent of muzak" (p.174). They

do not bear resemblance to the fluid, complex beings that create the daily reality of teaching writing; neither does the discourse do justice to the complicated and unpredictable process involved. This is particularly significant because writing, as an aspect of the secondary English curriculum, tends to be an area of anxiety for English teachers (Ofsted, 2009; Cremin & Myhill, 2012; Smith & Wrigley, 2016), and it is also significant because there is no consensus about how best to teach writing; there is no smooth and complete body of knowledge for novice teachers to gain. The language of policy documents, then, can be seen to be helpful only in the sense that it offers a "fantasmatic source of reassurance and certainty in the face of an unruly and chaotic world" (Clarke & Moore, 2013: 493).

What if, however, we were to conceive of the teacher as an *artist* (rather than a subject), with all the "exquisite aesthetic virtues" (McKernan, 2008: 7), agency and imaginative drive that this metaphor suggests? How much more effectively could this metaphor acknowledge the unpredictability of the learning process and the intuition and engaged responsiveness required on the part of the teacher to nurture it? This is not, of course, a new idea. Greene (1995) feels teachers should be as imaginatively engaged in their work as any artist, drawing on Schultz to coin the term "wide-awakeness" to describe the kind of alert, attentive and questioning state which teachers should develop to stay in (imaginative, artistic) touch with the curriculum and their pupils. Likewise, Bertrand Russell states that:

> The teacher, like the artist, the philosopher, and the man of letters, can only perform his work adequately if he feels himself to be an individual directed by an inner creative impulse, not dominated and fettered by an outside authority (Russell, 1950).

In the current climate, this view can sound romantic – to ears tuned by discourse that values only what is predictable and measurable. However, recent research has shown that excellent teachers, as judged in the current system, share one particular ability - the ability to *improvise* in the classroom (Sorenson, 2014); an aptitude that parallels artistic improvisation,

echoing Stenhouse's (1975) conception of the curriculum as a "musician's folio" rather than "an engineer's blueprint" (quoted in McKernan, 2008: 7) or Tomlinson and Germundson's (2007) comparison of teaching to creating jazz.

The significance to the writing teacher of this way of thinking about teaching seems obvious; in fact, the synergy between the process of teaching, in this artistic conception of it, and the process of writing led Graves to famously describe them as "twin crafts" (Graves, 1983). According to Graves (1983), what they share is a process which, in the hands of the writer/teacher, is shaped, organically, to achieve a purpose, drawing on existing knowledge and involving elements of improvisation and reflection. To take this further, consider Sartre's (1947) claim that writing is an act of freedom, breathing new meaning to the world, and which differs from other artistic endeavours in one important sense: writers cannot read their own writing (unlike shoemakers or architects who can inhabit their creations) because readers require anticipation to enter the world of the text. Writers, therefore, need readers in order to exist, just as, we could say, teachers need pupils. In this way, we can conceive of teaching writing as profoundly artistic, sharing, as it does, fundamental DNA with its own subject   matter.

Generating possibilities - the cognitive domain

"...[it is] by writing that I often manage to name alternatives and to open myself to possibilities. This is what I think learning ought to be" (Greene, 1995: 107)

Prior to the twentieth century, imagination was associated almost entirely with mental imagery: visualising or picturing something that was not (or had never been) there. Since then, however, philosophers and psychologists have begun to recognise imagination's important place in human cognition, in "supposing, considering, hypothesizing, entertaining"

(McGuinn, 2004: 603). Fundamental to this is the generation of possibilities, as White (1990) notes, "an imaginative person is one with the ability to think of lots of possibilities" (p.185). Smith (1992) agrees, calling this kind of imaginative thinking "the generation of alternatives" (p. 83). This is important because it seems to provide a way of describing the activity of (cognitive) imagination and its significance to teaching. According to Furlong (1961), a worker of any kind - tailor or cook as much as artist - can be imaginative if they approach their job "with" (as distinct from "in") imagination (p. 25) by moving beyond, for example, the tailor's pattern or the cook's recipe (ibid). In teaching, curriculum standardisation and teacher accountability measures are designed to *restrict* the generation of possibilities in the name of consistency, creating "a 'teaching by numbers' perspective" (Clarke & Moore, 2013: 490) which is detrimental to the writing classroom. Only a teacher working with cognitive imagination can find ways to resist and transcend this.

This makes a profoundly important link between imagination and the ability to conceive of alternative realities (Greene, 1995), of "imagining things being otherwise" (p. 22). It is the *cognitive* imagination that "allows us to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions" (ibid, p. 3) and is, therefore, "the first step toward acting on the belief that they can be changed" (p. 22). There is a satisfying note of hope in this (which Coleridge would have recognised as a feature of imagination), of "open pathways" (ibid, p. 12) rather than "narrow cul-de-sacs" (p. 17), which should not be underestimated in a system struggling to recruit and retain its teachers. It also provides an example of how the *cognitive* imagination powers critical thinking, which is widely recognised as a sophisticated cognitive capacity and one that we would surely expect a teacher to possess.

With specific reference to the "twin crafts" of teaching and writing, I argue that cognitive imagination is central to the writing process itself. Sentences, after all, "represent possibilities" (McGinn, 2011: 604) and are therefore forged from a range of possible

alternatives. A good writer generates, explores and selects from those alternatives in the process of composition and revision. The process can be arduous but, ultimately, satisfying because when we write we create reality, we introduce "order where there was none, by imposing unity of mind on the diversity of things" (Sartre, 1947: 371). Consider the pupils in the lesson Anderson (2013) observed, who instead of having access to the joy and discomfort of this process, were presented with a passage so neat and contrived that it had, arguably, no educational value at all; feeding pupils a misconception that using specific language techniques guarantees effective writing. The component most noticeable in its absence from the student teacher's sequence was, of course, a sense of the writing *process.* This is hardly surprising as the focus on process in teaching writing has been undermined since its hey-day in the 1970s. Perhaps, however, there is reason to reinstate the debate.

Perspective-taking and empathy - the affective domain

"Any encounter with actual human beings who are trying to learn requires imagination on the part of the teacher" (Greene 2005: 36)

When, in the introduction to her edited volume "Imaginative Minds", psychologist Ilona Roth (2007) refers to the imagination as"...the complex and exclusively human skill of perspective taking" (p. xxviii), she does so without fanfare or particular emphasis. And yet it seems, to this author's mind, to be a moment of clarity in the "dense and tangled" territory of the field (Furlong, 1961: 5). This is for two particular reasons. Firstly, to conceive of imagination as perspective-taking is to acknowledge the advanced, highly-evolved cognitive processes required to extend our standpoint beyond the information provided by our senses and the limits of our embodied states (Roth, 2007; Turner 2007). Our ability in this regard is such that we can move back and forward in time, travel to far-flung places and even take the perspective of non-human entities, like animals (Turner, 2007), or death (used by Marcus

Zuzak to narrate "The Book Thief"). Secondly, by identifying and naming this feature of the human imagination we can see that it is quite distinct from creativity, which is important if we are to make a special case for imagination in education. Creativity, which has so many able (and righteous) advocates, rather dominates the discussion (Egan, 1988) and yet is not usually associated with either perspective taking or the emotional sensitivity implied by it (discussed below). As creativity and imagination are often erroneously synonymised, this means that the specific benefits of prioritising imagination in education can be missed; a problem this paper seeks to begin to address.

Imagination-as-perspective-taking is intimately connected to *empathy* – a link made by Hume in Book Two of his *Treatise* and later by Greene who declared that "imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible" (Greene, 1995: 3). For Greene, this is fundamental to education because through empathy we extend our experience to include even seemingly alien perspectives, "to discover how it looks and feels from the vantage point of the person whose world it is" (ibid: 4). This, in turn, underpins the development of "humane and liberating classrooms" (ibid: 5) in which teachers properly attend to their pupils' voices, alert to the "plurality of consciousnesses" (ibid: 198) contained therein. More recently, research in cognitive science has also emphasised the importance of imagination and empathy to the kind of co-operative behaviour necessary for human beings to prosper and, indeed, prevail as a species (Boyer, 2007; Nettle, 2007). Cognitive scientists suggest that empathy is particularly crucial for positive and productive small-group collaboration (ibid), a fact which clearly argues for its value in terms of work in the classroom.

However, whilst empathy is a staple feature of medical training programmes (Bonvicini et al, 2009), it is conspicuous in its near-absence from secondary teacher education and its associated literature or policy. It is not referenced at all (even at the level of subtext) in the Teachers' Standards (DoE, 2011). We can consider this odd if we reflect on the intensely

social and emotional aspects of teaching and learning - the complex daily work with young human souls, all vulnerable because of their age; many vulnerable in a range of additional ways. This may be because empathy is both difficult to define and difficult to measure, leaving training providers lost for ideas about how to address it. However, I argue it is also due to the "re-allocation of values with regards to the purposes of education" (Hall & McGinity, 2015: 5) which has accompanied standardisation and the accountability agenda, creating a framework in which "efficiency, effectiveness and productivity" (ibid) are prized as key teacher attributes over less quantifiable characteristics like empathy.

When it comes to teaching writing, it can be argued that, perhaps more than any other area of the curriculum, we need teachers who have empathetic understanding of the task faced by their pupils (Smith, 1982; Shelley Reid, 2009; Richmond, 2017) and can support and challenge all aspects of an individual's writing "personality" (Richmond, 2017: 73). To do this, writing teachers need to "recognise the complexity of what they ask students to do when they ask them to write" (ibid: 71), which is a recognition that requires a finely developed ability to see from the perspectives of others. This ability on the part of the teacher is, according to Smith (1982), more important than any particular method or system of writing instruction as "even the best of ideas can be misused in the hands of a misguided or *insensitive* teacher" (p. 200, my italics). Too often, claim Cremin & Myhill (2012), teachers ask pupils to write for the sake of the system: to satisfy the 'third voice'; to secure examination results. How much could a focus on empathetic perspective-taking counteract this tendency and, if it could, might it not merit a more prominent place in the discussion of teaching and the teaching of writing?

A brief note on implications for practice

It is beyond the remit of this paper to set out detailed recommendations for practice. However, I would like to offer my emerging sense of what the teacher working with (aesthetic, cognitive, perspective-taking) imagination might *do* in the writing classroom (which will include, no doubt, what many imaginative teachers *are* doing).   The imaginative writing teacher might:

- Find opportunities to join pupils in classroom writing activities and be prepared to share her draft work, including crossings out and re-writes.

- Where possible and appropriate, adopt a 'writing workshop' approach to teaching writing, turning the classroom into a *community* of writers who are empowered to experiment, reflect and offer sensitive feedback on each other's work.

- Model 'live' writing, externalising otherwise internal decisions and processes.

- Engage in private writing, which she would consider as important as reading.

- Place as much value on the ideas generation stage of the writing process as the correction of spelling, punctuation and grammar errors.

- Pay (empathetic) attention to the content of pupils' writing, in recognition that this is an important part of their own, personal meaning-making.

This is not intended as a comprehensive, or ground-breaking, list of practical strategies for the writing classroom.   Through professional dialogue, I hope that this list is extended or amended by practitioners who subscribe to the theoretical perspectives raised in this paper.

Conclusion: Maxine Greene and the development of the disruptive professional

"…it is disruptive to look at things as if they could be otherwise. There is tension in this looking…" (Greene, 1995: 15)

This paper has explored the idea that teaching writing, and the teachers of writing, may be suffering in the current climate of unprecedented accountability, whose frameworks are inadequate in the face of the complex emotional and personal dimensions of both writing

and teaching. By re-visiting and re-organising ideas of imagination in education, this paper seeks to open up dialogue on how we might re-envisage teaching writing. However, as teaching is dominated by a policy discourse that shuts down debate by presenting as natural reality what is, in fact, a deliberate construction of reality (Clarke & Moore, 2013), an element of disruptiveness is necessary for this re-imagining. To achieve it, we must be prepared to resist taken for granted knowledge, or what Greene (1995) calls the "cloud of givenness" (p. 47), to "look through [our] own eyes, to find [our] own voices, to avoid the formulations devised by official others" (p. 20).

To do this, the disruptive professional must be prepared to acknowledge and embrace uncertainty and discomfort, which are elements of both teaching and writing ignored in official discourse but which offer rich possibilities for learning (Fowler, 2006). In a system which, intentionally or no, seeks to "standardise people" (Clarke & Moore, 2013: 490), we must pay particular attention to identity development in novice teachers, to help them find the language to construct authentic teaching selves. Thinking of teaching writing in terms of imagination does not provide us with a "how-to" list for this; after all, "…the role of imagination is not to resolve, not to point the way, not to improve. It is to awaken, to disclose to ordinarily unseen, unheard, and unexpected" (Greene, 1995: 28). Nevertheless, I suggest this journey is worth embarking on, for imagination brings *hope* and the possibility of liberation and it is only with imagination that: "Education will be viewed as if, after all, it can be otherwise" (Greene, 2003: xi).

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