



Crafty Students in Advanced English



Steve Henry reflects on how to encourage Stage 6 English students to be more confident as writers...

Like most English teachers, I've become accustomed to student negativity about their own abilities. If I tell a student at the start of the lesson that we are going to write a story, then the common response is 'I can't write stories.'

So it really shouldn't have come as a surprise that when I asked my Year 12 class to come up with a metaphor to describe themselves as a writer, the responses were universally negative. One student saw their "writerly" self as the Captain of the Titanic, another pictured themselves as a bird with no wings. There was a 'sea of grief'; there was a student who saw their efforts to write as being like an attempt to cross a busy road. Then I asked them to turn their metaphors into poems. One of the boys, Justin, came up with this:

Newton's Law of Motion and Writing

*A young writer at rest
Will remain at rest
Unless enacted upon
By a force of panic*

This was an Advanced English class: most of them had been through eleven years of formal English education where they'd been asked to write and edit countless stories, experiment with genre and form and analyse and respond to novels, short stories, poems and films. I wondered whether I would receive the same response if I wandered into a Stage 5 Woodwork class, or if I asked the Year 12 Art class to consider themselves as artists.

And like most English teachers who have been working their way through the new syllabus, I have wrestled with the Craft of Writing, wondering how best to teach it and how to prepare the students for the HSC, and feeling inadequate on both counts.

The more I thought about it, the more I saw that this module does not so much represent a simple change in the content of the course as a deeper shift in the way the students should approach English as a whole, particularly in Stage 6.

We must now ask the students to think of themselves as artisans; as students of the craft. This might then change the way they view texts in other modules.

The previous iteration of the Stage 6 syllabus did not make this demand, allowing students, for the most part, to adopt the armchair position of the critic, rather than setting them up at the workbench of the participant.

Whether it was that I had become tired of the old course or whether it was because it was simply inadequate in the nourishing of student creativity, I prefer the new syllabus. I have enjoyed the gradual shift in thinking that I have seen in the students and have relished the chance to re-calibrate my own approach. And what became clear to me was that Module C could not, and should not, be contained within one quarter of the Year 12 course. For, if we are asking the students to stand up and consider themselves as writers in one Module we can't simply ask them to resume their seats for the other three. Thus, the setting for most of Stage 6 English becomes the workshop rather than the lecture theatre or the art gallery. The eye of the artisan becomes an important lens through which to view other aspects of the course.



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Below are some ways in which a student might become more confident about their skills as a writer across the Stage 6 syllabus.

Year 11: Reading to Write and the Multimodal

The platform for this change is set in Year 11. The Reading to Write common module requires students to engage in *'judicious reflection on their skills and knowledge as writers'*, drawing the spotlight away from the texts so that they can, in turn, become a source of light and inspiration for the students' own writing. Its place as the opening unit of Stage 6 is significant as it aims to re-introduce the students to the toolkit of the writer, exposing them to a variety of textual forms and inviting them to experiment with their own writing; privileging their writing over endless analysis.

I suggest that teachers ask their students to think of themselves as writers at the start of Year 11 instead of posing that question at the start of their HSC year.

The mandated multimodal task can then also be seen in a slightly different light. Rather than the constant questions of what a multimodal task actually is, or what is the best way to approach it, the real question becomes how to get the students to see its use as a natural step forward in their craft. The multimodal task gives them greater agency in the construction of their response. It requires them to thoughtfully balance an understanding of their purpose and content with the various creative possibilities presented by the interplay of the modes.

Textual Conversations

I had not given much thought to the move to Textual Conversations in Module A until I connected it with Module C.

Initially, I regarded it as a cake with essentially the same ingredients, of text and context, that had simply been renamed. But when viewed through the lens of Module C, the idea of a 'conversation' between an older and newer text takes on a different hue. The syllabus asks the students to consider the process of reimagining and reframing a text, or aspects of a text, which is exactly what they have been doing since they set foot into the workshop of Reading to Write. It not only invites them to reconsider the way a text resonates with older texts, but it also includes them in the organic and creative re-shaping of a text that can occur with time and shifts in context.

Viva Voce

Ever since Extension 2 was introduced in 2001, I have thought that the Viva Voce was the most authentic and 'enjoyable' task on the assessment calendar for Stage 6, but haven't really been able to work out a way to replicate it in the other courses. This year, at the end of Term 2, we ran a viva voce (mandatory but non-assessable) task in Advanced English, with each student having the chance to discuss the purpose, form and language choices of a suite of writing that they would submit for the portfolio task (our main Module C task). In each interview there was that familiar note of authenticity as the students explained from where their ideas had come, or the role of research and workshopping in the shaping of their work. It was the moment that they finally showed themselves as hands on, 'crafty' students involved in developing pieces of writing that reflected their own values, interests, thoughts and creativity.



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Final Thoughts

Several years ago, I began setting aside an hour or two each weekend specifically for imaginative writing. Truth be told, I head off to the local shopping centre, buy a coffee and two cinnamon donuts and sit in a quiet corner and write. It quickly became one of the most enjoyable moments of my week, something to which I'd look forward. But it also changed the way I read books, as a particular passage in a Winton or Mantel novel can often stop me in my tracks, forcing me to ponder its magic. Now I have to have a pen with me as I read, to underline a startling metaphor or circle a description of place.

This is how I would like my students to engage with the craft of writing, both their own and others. And while there is the ongoing debate about whether Module C is best taught as a stand-alone, or as an integrated unit, I have formed the conviction that it offers them the tools and skills and thinking that will be very useful for them at every step of the Stage 6 journey through English.

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