Working towards a ‘thirdspace’ in the teaching of writing to middle years students

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ABSTRACT
This paper discusses the teaching of writing within the competing and often contradictory spaces of high-stakes testing and the practices and priorities around writing pedagogy in diverse school communities. It examines the spaces that influence and are influenced by teachers’ pedagogical priorities for writing in two linguistically diverse upper primary school case studies. Findings show that when teachers’ practices focus on the teaching of structure and skills alongside identity building and voice, students can produce dramatic, authoritative and resonant texts. The paper argues that ‘thirdspaces’ can be forged that attend to accountability requirements, yet also give the required attention to more complex aspects of writing necessary for students to invest in writing as a creative and critical form of communication for participation in society and the knowledge economy.

Introduction
The teaching of writing, particularly in the middle years of schooling, is impacted on by converging, and at times, contradictory pedagogical spaces. Perceptions about the way in which writing should be taught are clearly affected by standardised testing regimes in Australia. That is, much writing is taught as a genre process, yet results on standardised tests such as the National Assessment Program in Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) show that the writing component consistently receives the lowest scores (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2013). Research shows that creative and individualised approaches are necessary for quality writing (Grainger, Goouch & Lambirth, 2005).

This paper investigates the writing practices of students in Years 5 to 7 in two culturally and linguistically diverse schools. It shows that the writing practices of these students are greatly influenced by teachers’ perceptions about what is required by external testing bodies such as the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). The paper will then highlight how socio-spatial theory (Lefebvre, 1991) can be applied to explain these practices and offers the notion of a more productive ‘thirdspace’ (Soja, 1996) for improvement in the teaching of writing.

Research on the teaching of writing
In comparison to research on the teaching of reading, the teaching of writing can be seen as an area in greater need for more research. The research that does exist is informative and offers a number of effective strategies to improve the teaching of writing practices in schools, albeit from one particular pedagogical viewpoint. Graham and Perin’s (2007) work, which was commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation in the US, offers a number
of recommendations for teaching writing to middle and high school students. Generally, these recommendations point to the fact that explicit and systematic approaches are essential and the development of skills such as planning, revising and editing is also necessary. This research focussed on the idea that good writing also impacts on quality of reading.

Ivanic (2004) offered a useful summary of the discourses of writing which engender particular beliefs about language, writing and learning to write, and teaching approaches which tend to be utilised within each discourse. She identified six discourses from a range of data such as policy documents, teaching and learning materials, teacher and student interviews, and media coverage. These include a skills discourse, a creativity discourse, a process discourse, a genre discourse, a social practices discourse, and a socio-political discourse. A skills discourse focuses on sound-symbol relationships and syntactic structures to construct text; a creativity discourse is learner-centred and prioritises writing about topics of interest; a process discourse foregrounds the teaching of mental and practical processes of constructing a text; a genre discourse acknowledges that the social context and purpose of the writing shapes it as particular text types; a social practices discourse sees writing as a purpose-driven communication in a social context; and a socio-political discourse is interested in the ways that language represents people and things and is related to identity building.

Ivanic (2004) suggests that teachers mainly draw from more than one discourse at any time, possibly utilising two or more approaches to writing in a single lesson, although it may also be possible to identify a dominant discourse at play. Dominant discourses can also be found in curriculum materials. In Australia, the national curriculum for English (ACARA, 2012) is organised around three strands of language, literacy and literature, and promotes each of the six discourses of writing by seemingly affording equal value to the written text, the mental processes of writing, the writing event and the sociocultural and political context of writing. The implementation of this new curriculum, however, may still see teachers (or systems) prioritising particular discourses as they prepare for standardised testing procedures such as NAPLAN.

Developing a relationship with the reader is part of the identity work that the writer does (Ivanic, 1998). This approach moves away from a purely cognitive view of writer’s ‘voice’ through the process of writing, to a more social view of the relationship between the writer and reader and the identity that the writer builds through creativity and voice. The notion that creativity is an integral part of the writing process has been acknowledged in the literature (Greene, 1991; Jewitt, 2008; Wright, 2010); yet it is not always enacted in time-poor and test-focused classrooms. Novel ideas and uncustomary ways of viewing things can often be facilitated through multiple modes. Indeed, Jewitt (2008) found that ‘the use of performance and visual arts opened up the voices of the students identified as reluctant writers’ (p. 255). Grainger, Gooch and Lambirth (2002, 2005) suggested that young writers today may know more about morphological and technical features of writing; however, they question whether students have a desire to write or indeed whether they are offered opportunities to play with words and generate new possibilities for voice in writing. The pre-writing phase is integral in building students’ investment and interest in writing so they demonstrate textual mastery appropriate for the task at hand and critically and creatively engage with the reader and the subject matter through voice.

Elbow (2000) identifies five ways that voice can be present in writing: first, the audible voice to describe the sound of a text, that is, the rhythm, tone or accent of the text as a spoken piece, which is not valued so much in expository or academic texts; second, the dramatic voice to identify the persona, or character, taken up by the author; and third, a recognisable voice, or style of writing, that is distinctive of an author; fourth, an authoritative
voice able to speak the truth, or convey the truth—highly valued in academic or formal writing (Carbone & Orellana, 2010); and a resonant voice, or presence, which reveals the relationship between what the writer commits to paper and his or her unconscious, that is, how they show what they don’t know as much as what they do about this style of writing or the subject matter (Carbone & Orellana, 2010).

The next section offers a theoretical framing for our project. We found that the approaches to writing that teachers take are strongly influenced by broader social contexts and expectations, thus we have utilised socio-spatial theory.

**Socio-spatial theory**

Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) theory of spatiality offers a very useful way to understand how teachers operate across competing spaces, particularly in the teaching of writing. He suggests that we negotiate three inter-twined spaces as we go about our daily lives: first, real space or what Lefebvre calls ‘perceived’ space; second, ideal or ‘conceived’ space; and third, ‘lived’ space (Lefebvre, 1991) or what Soja (1996) calls ‘thinspace.’ The three spaces operate simultaneously, each influencing and being influenced by the others.

Real or ‘perceived’ space refers to the daily practices, routines, locations, infrastructure, and relationships that are established and reproduced in any context. It is a space where everyday things and practices are ‘perceived’ as normal social practice. In the teaching of writing, ‘perceived’ space includes classroom practices around textual composition, skill development, programs of writing and professional development for teachers. Ideal or ‘conceived’ spaces are representations of power and ideology. They are the ‘ideal’ of how society should be, according to those in power, and thus they influence what happens in real everyday space. Examples of ‘conceived’ space include media reports about good teaching and government policies and programs such as NAPLAN, teacher standards and the MySchool website. ‘Lived’ space or ‘thinspace’ is a space to resist, subvert and re-imagine everyday realities. It offers the potential for space to be made and remade with generative possibilities for critical transformation. It is a space for new possibilities and imaginings of how things could be. ‘Thinspace’ offers teachers wriggle room to negotiate government agendas, but at the same time, to attend to what is required for quality writing.

In the next section, we describe our research project, which highlights the dangers of only attending to conceived spaces such as NAPLAN in the teaching of writing. Yet, we also offer hope for thinspace practices that some teachers have adopted to ensure quality writing outcomes, while at the same time meeting system requirements.

**Background to our research**

Research evidence suggests that adolescents show poor control of language features such as abstraction and lexical density, which are crucial elements of sophisticated texts required in secondary school and university (Christie, 2005). It is crucial that teachers know about the types of writing that students engage in and the different demands of writing in and out of school so they can build bridges between these different forms of writing. Further, ACARA has benchmarks set for writing standards of all school-aged children.

The research project, entitled *Writing in and out of school: Exploring early adolescents’ online and offline writing*, aimed to identify what types of writing early adolescents actually engage in. It also investigated the linguistic and textual features of young students’ writing, how students see themselves as writers, and what their perceptions are of in-school and out-of-school writing activities. In addition, the project aimed to gauge teachers’ understandings of writing tasks set in the classroom, as well as what they thought their students do in terms...
of writing out of school. Data were collected in two linguistically diverse schools: Willow Edge School (WES) and Mountain Gully School (MGS) (pseudonyms).

**Participants**

Participants for this research included Years 5 to 7 (aged 9 to 13 years) students and Years 5 to 7 teachers and the Head of Curriculum/writing coordinator at both schools. Four teachers at Mountain Gully School and three at Willow Edge School completed a questionnaire about their writing pedagogies and practices, and 40 students at MGS and 42 at WES also completed a questionnaire about their writing practices and attitudes towards writing. In addition to these questionnaire data, the writing co-ordinator/Head of Curriculum at each school was interviewed about whole-school approaches to writing, and 12 students from each school identified from the questionnaire (to represent a range of backgrounds and writing practices) agreed to be interviewed and to provide writing samples which represented the types of writing they engage in both in and out of school. This paper will report on the interviews with each of the writing coordinators and the children, as well as the children’s samples of work.

**Findings**

**Case Study 1: Mountain Gully School (MGS)**

Mountain Gully is a relatively small school with approximately 270 students enrolled from Prep to Year 7. It is identified as a low socioeconomic school with only 12% of parents receiving income over the top quarter. 33% of the students speak languages other than English at home and 8.6% of students are Indigenous Australians. There is also a high proportion of students at MGS with special learning needs.

MGS’s writing program aims for students to ‘communicate experiences, thoughts, feelings, ideas, opinions and knowledge effectively through the written mode’ (MGS writing policy). Students are expected to be able to write for a range of purposes – to inform, persuade, entertain, respond, instruct, describe or explain and to relate to, move, inspire, motivate, up-skill or gain support from a range of audiences’ (MGS writing policy). The writing policy at the school was developed in response to writing results on the NAPLAN tests and aimed to improve the children’s writing skills across the whole school. The writing program is steeped in Ivanic’s genre discourse with each level being responsible for selected genres in preparation for what will be tested on the NAPLAN tests for Years 3, 5 and 7.

According to the Head of Curriculum, Barbara, the teachers also attended professional development to support them in the teaching of writing. She indicated that it focussed on ‘what makes good writing, what the kids need to do to improve NAPLAN … we’ve spent a lot of work around the process that sits behind teaching kids to be good writers.’ Barbara makes a lexical link between writing for NAPLAN and ‘good’ writing which specifies a logic of equivalence (Fairclough, 2003) between them. The conceived space of what is deemed to be an indicator of quality – standardised test results – permeates the perceived practices at the school, understandable under the gaze of highly visible test results and performance goals (Ryan & Barton, in press).

Despite MGS’s targeted approach to improve writing, albeit through a genre-focussed approach, there was limited opportunity for the students to engage in deep and rich writing practices; rather they depended on on-demand and formulaic approaches. The data indeed show how this type of approach impacted greatly on students’ work overall.

In the student interviews it was evident that they undertook writing activities because they had to and not necessarily because they enjoyed it. Simon for example states that ‘I
like to write stories but I don’t normally get a chance.’ He continues to describe his writing practices as ‘quick’ writes, which indicates a consistency with the on-demand writing required by NAPLAN. Simon says that:

We’re told to do it like that … I would have my, like my introduction and then I’d have like my paragraphs of the, like main story and the like complication …. I’d have my introduction like a thesis, this thing and then I’d have, I’d state reasons for why the thing’s better or worse – and then I’d restate my thesis at the end.

Here we see that Simon has learnt a number of formulas for writing. This disables any identity building as part of Simon’s writing process (Ivanic, 1998); nor does it lead to a creative approach or flow to writing (Jackson et al., 2001).

Similarly, David who speaks Vietnamese at home says that: ‘We have to do what the teacher says but otherwise I wouldn’t do it … it’s something that I have to do, not like, because we get in trouble if we don’t do it, so I have to do it.’ David repeats ‘have to do’ a number of times, and uses causal statements to point to negative consequences if he does not complete the set tasks. Even though David did not particularly like writing he had the technical language to be able to talk about it by saying words such as ‘high modality, in the third person’ and also text types such as ‘narrative, information reports, persuasive texts.’ He also shared the fact that he never really spoke to anyone about his writing, as when they write in class ‘it’s mostly quiet time and we’re not allowed to talk.’ David is clearly trained in the ‘school’ discourses of writing, whereby you write for the teacher and according to the teacher’s accountable conditions. This is acknowledged as a common feature of classrooms with multilingual writers (Enright & Gilliland, 2011). David is not involved in any identity work that could potentially spark his interest in writing, let alone enable him to draw on his

![Figure 1. David's writing sample](image-url)

Figure 1. David’s writing sample
cultural and linguistic resources to construct a writing identity. David has not developed a recognisable or dramatic voice (Elbow, 2000) to connect with the reader who tends to be the teacher rather than an authentic audience.

The interview with David revealed his dislike for writing and upon analysis of his writing samples we can see that there is a clear robotic approach to complete the task at hand. In the sample of writing in Figure 1, there is a lack of a variety of moods used, which in turn has limited impact on and appeal to the reader. The use of a series of conjunctions and and or as additive semantic relations, causes the example to come across as a list of viewpoints rather than as a coherent building up of an argument with causal, contrastive or elaborate semantic relations that would ultimately persuade the reader.

In Parvathi’s writing (see Figure 2), we see a similar affect. While Parvathi has clearly planned for her writing using a Y chart, she fails to implement these ideas into her final product.

Again Parvathi’s writing example, like David’s, results in consecutive sentences listing activities that she does while at the Funland without implementing some of the descriptive language, such as nauseous, claustrophobic, exciting, excited voices, soft instructions, giggling, that she provides in her planning. Her final copy reverts back to simple vocabulary and additive temporal semantic relations (Fairclough, 2003), indicated by after, then, next.

Unfortunately, MGS students do not demonstrate a dramatic or recognisable voice in their writing and therefore lack important skills. Rather than being able to make an impact through their writing identity, the students have followed set steps to writing that their teachers have given them. The ‘perceived’ and ‘conceived’ practices in teaching writing are highly visible in the MGS students’ writing outcomes with a formulaic approach to improve standardised results on their NAPLAN tests. This can be seen as a reactive approach governed by systemic constraints (also see Comber, 2012). This approach may well have improved results for lower achieving students on these tests; however, it has done little to develop more complex writing skills and the identity building that is necessary for writers to become effective writers contributing to society (Ryan & Barton, in press).

Case Study 2: Willow Edge School (WES)
In comparison, WES is a large metropolitan school with over 700 students and has over 32% of students who speak a language other than English. While it also has culturally and linguistically diverse students, it is identified as sitting in the high Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) band, with over 70% of parents indicating income level in
the top quarter. This is a very different story from MGS. Two years prior to this research, WES was found to be below average in the NAPLAN writing component. This resulted in the school implementing strategies that would improve the writing practices of the students. The literacy coordinator at WES, Sam, therefore implemented a writing program called the ‘Seven Steps to Writing Success Program’ (McVeity, 2012). The program describes a process approach to the writing of narratives, using terminology that children would understand, such as sizzling starts, building tension, heavy writing and backfill. The program is steeped in a skills discourse (Ivanic, 2004), and it makes an assumption that a skills approach is the only way for students to become successful writers. The program therefore lacks any evidence of social practices or socio-political discourses (Ivanic, 2004) in its aim to improve high impact writing, and it also seems to prioritise narrative writing.

Sam indicates in her interview that ‘we work around the NAPLAN but only because it’s an easier way to sort of have a particular focus … what actually happens is teachers are also teaching other genres or other aspects of writing in their classrooms. Running coincidingly so that kids are getting a variety.’ She therefore notes that the writing approach associated with standardised testing is just one approach to the teaching of writing. There are also ‘thirdspace’ practices occurring, even though there is still a need for these to run alongside ‘conceived’ practices, such as the teaching of genre discourse. The school has introduced an extended pre-writing phase to develop vocabulary and oral language use – ‘we’ll start off by doing lots of oral work, always oral … if you don’t build that vocab you’ve got no chance … and some of our ESL kids can work out how to get their meaning across orally, then we can look at how to capture that in their writing’ – and have taught students to write reflectively about their writing as a way to make their metacognitive knowledge (Slomp, 2012) more visible to their teachers. Sam suggests that ‘the teachers can look at the kids’ reflections and see what they’re trying to do … we need to work out why they do stuff in their writing.’ This thirdspace includes informal action research into pedagogy that works as opposed to what is expected.

Students’ writing at WES shows clear evidence that teacher intervention has an impact on writing. Audible and dramatic voice (Elbow, 2000) are apparent in the writing samples as students apply the skills from ‘Seven Steps’ to create impact, including building tension, sizzling starts and ban the boring. For example, Dale, an ESL student from Vietnam, begins his narrative with an exciting event, as shown in Figure 3.

![Figure 3. Dale's introduction](image)

Dale’s use of hyperbole, ‘no choice but to die,’ and onomatopoeia, ‘crack of lightning,’ are indicative of a dramatic and audible voice; yet these characteristics, without a sense of
how to pull the audience along for the ride with a resonant (narrative) voice or recognisable voice (Elbow, 2000) through characterisation, plot development and cohesive style, mean that Dale’s writing becomes a series of ‘exciting’ yet easily resolved events which make no temporal sense.

Dale is applying his skills to create impact – he uses repetition, ‘tried and tried, read and read,’ and emotive verbs, ‘sacrificed,’ and a series of complications; yet there is no sense that he is invested in this story. He doesn’t invite a commitment from the audience to the characters, as they are not ascribed personality and their motivations are not described or evaluated (see Figure 4).

Similarly, in Alice’s writing example (see Figure 5), we see a tense and exciting beginning (a sizzling start) that foregrounds a dramatic and audible voice.

As the ferocious, angry waves smashed against the strong rocks, my boat
The Tiki was smashed against the rock and splintered into what looked as though a million tiny pieces. As my boat crumbled into the sea I leaped out with terror from my boat in to the icy, blue sea. The water slapped my skin the first moment I hit the water I was PETRIFIED....

I’m going to die! Will I be smashed against the rocks or be eaten by shark?
The possibilities are endless.
My freezing hands tread the very unforgiving sea, my blood-shot eyes caught sight of a very mysterious and disturbing figure it was about five meters long lurking behind small rock and slowly but surely creeping to wards me. I can almost imagine its three rows of razor sharp teeth slicing threw my body like a huge blender.

But I couldn’t leave my loving wife and three children behind, how would they cope without me? I WILL SURVIVE I hope... I swam for dear life as fast as my terrified body could take me I scrambled frantically onto the biggest barmaced rock the barnacles ripped my body they shredded my skin. I felt I couldn’t go on but I just kep’ on fighting for life. When I reached the top of the rock my whole body was bleeding. The man only lived for a few more painful minutes... he bled to death!

Figure 4. Dale’s series of events

Figure 5. Alice’s writing example
In the second paragraph, we can see Alice’s effective description: ‘a very mysterious and disturbing figure lurking behind a rock,’ but by the third paragraph she changes tenor from ‘I’ to ‘the man,’ which interrupts the flow and presents a quick and unsatisfying ending, suggesting little connection to the reader or this subject matter. It signposts little investment in the story and, in a sense, a ‘writing by numbers’ approach.

Ged’s narrative on the other hand shows a high sophistication in the use of language and description, as evident in Figure 6.

Ryan closed his eyes, hoping, more than anything, that he would once again hear his grandfather’s strange but comforting voice, strange because what he said bore only a tenuous connection with reality and comforting because, before his dementia, Ryan’s grandfather had always been there for him …

Netsook’s walking was almost as unsteady as his mind. He would stumble every five steps or so … and would talk to inanimate objects, which included complimenting an upright fan on its hairdo …

Before he left, Ryan looked deep into his grandfather’s eyes, trying to see if there was any recognition, or any trace of the former self he had grown up around. But he saw only a blank, white slate without colour or meaning, an opaque window hiding what, if anything, was left of his soul … ‘Could you pass me the salted papershredder, please?’ Netsook said to his neighbour …

Figure 6. Ged’s writing sample

Ged’s narrative about visiting his grandfather who has dementia, including a flashback element remembering stories from his grandfather’s childhood, is engaging and realistic. Ged (who was born in the USA and moves between there and Australia) explores the relationship between the two characters, strategies for dealing with difficult emotions, and his knowledge about dementia and its effects, indicating an authoritative and resonant voice and an investment in the story. He uses humour, creative wordplay and figurative language to foreground his audible and dramatic voice and posit a recognisable style. Ged’s writing identity is one of a writer who has something to share and make comment about, rather than someone who is going through the motions of a school task (Ryan & Barton, in press).

Another example, this time a persuasive text by Hani (see Figure 7), an EAL student from India, uses a variety of moods (imperative, declarative, interrogative), strong evaluative statements and a clear authoritative voice about the subject matter of Nelson Mandela. She easily hybridises the text types of biography and persuasive speech, temporally elaborating on Mandela’s life and achievements, while emphasising the impact of his life on others to build her argument. Her Global Citizen speech is engaging, well informed and convincing, suggesting an interest and belief in her argument about the worthiness of Mandela as a hero. Her audible and dramatic voice is used well for the speech genre.

Committee members look no further. If you want the best, you’ve got the best! I strongly believe that Nelson Mandela should be your number one choice for Hero of the Year. Why you may ask? This noble man has dedicated his life to achieving equality for black people in South Africa.

Figure 7. Hani’s writing sample

Hani uses evaluative descriptors and nouns, ‘worthy cause, incredible hardship,’ and emotive verbs to highlight the actions of her subject Mandela, ‘fighting injustice, protecting the rights, outraged by social injustice, dedicated his life.’ And her strong modality and
resonant voice invites the reader to invest in the assumptions about Mandela’s worthiness and his inspiration to others. Both Ged and Hani show writing styles that represent a writing identity that moves beyond school discourses. Even though Hani is writing a school task, her command of the genre and subject matter, and her voice evident throughout the text, mean that she positions herself as a writer, not just as a finisher of tasks.

The successful writers at WES have been given time and space for reflection, identity building (Ivanic, 1998) and creative flow (Jackson et al., 2001). The students can develop a relationship with the reader and represent their identities as writers, while at the same time, learning the structures and processes that are also necessary to complete writing tasks.

Conclusion
Quality writing is the victim of time and influence from external testing regimes. Understanding how teachers and schools respond to the Australian national discourse of testing is important, as the data in this project show that teachers really do make a difference. Their pedagogic priorities clearly have an impact on students’ writing outcomes. Unfortunately, conceived spaces of standardisation in the form of formulaic skills and structures are privileged in many of our schools. Students need more than just standardised testing to invest in their writing practices. We argue that a ‘thirdspace,’ where an authoritative command of subject matter and an ability to engage the reader as a writer with something to say, are both essential to improve writing practices. Developing a reflective and self-conscious writing identity for culturally and linguistically diverse students needs explicit instruction and a recognition of students’ own personal experiences in order for effective and successful writing to happen. Under highly structured conditions, without attention to creativity, reflection and identity building, the types of one-off writing that students produce show evidence of specific skill development, yet lack the fluidity and linguistic complexity of confident writers to develop an authentic relationship with the reader (Ryan & Barton, in press).

References


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