Evelyn McKenna illustrates how Talk for Writing is creating outstanding progress in Pia Wadjarri Remote Community School in the Australian outback.

Pia Wadjarri Remote Community School is a unique little school, located in the Murchison region of Western Australia, a vast sparsely populated area encompassing pastoral stations and ancient red desert country. There are no shops – the closest ones are reached by travelling 200 km on a largely unsealed road. The 12 students enrolled in Pia Wadjarri RCS are of aboriginal descent and their ancestors have been occupying this country for 60 thousand years. Children live in multi-generational families; the three education assistants working in the school are the mothers, aunties or grandmothers of the students.

I am an experienced teacher with a love for teaching all aspects of literacy. On arriving at Pia Wadjarri RCS last year, I was deeply concerned by some students' low levels of achievement, their reluctance to write, poor grasp of basic literacy and low self-image as writers. After some research, I discovered Talk for Writing and I was sure that this way of teaching writing would build on the strengths of our aboriginal students.

Traditionally, learning for aboriginal children was largely a matter of observation and imitation and much of it took place within concrete contexts. The imitation and innovation phase of TfW taps into this preferred learning style and provides a safe scaffold for students to gain confidence and develop mastery. It has been exciting to see the way they have progressed using the TfW model. The structure of the text models builds confidence and skills. The opportunities for over learning in an exciting and imaginative way has reinforced and built upon these skills, which is precisely what is required for the children to progress and reach their potential.

After attending a 2-day professional development course in Perth, I was ready to implement TfW in our classrooms working alongside two other teachers. However, it has not been without its challenges. The children here speak a dialect of Standard Australian English known as Aboriginal English and their exposure to wider language models and extensive vocabulary is limited.

The other major challenge we faced in implementing TfW was our students' reluctance to write. Their knowledge of phonics was weak and they struggled to spell words. Last year, we implemented a daily synthetic phonics program and have built on that learning this year with a Direct Instruction Spelling Mastery program. The children have demonstrated far greater willingness to write now the cognitive load of sounding out every word has been removed. We recently assessed their progress in spelling and were delighted to discover that they have all accelerated progress in phonics of more than a year's growth in 12 months.

Like most classrooms in remote schools, we have a small group of multi-age students in each class. In the junior class they range in age from 5 years to 9 years old. Prior to beginning Talk for Writing, the students in the junior class wrote stories using short simple sentences and a small range of vocabulary. They were reluctant to write without assistance and often, when they wrote, missed words out so that their stories did not make sense. Moreover, students did not punctuate their

sentences. This case study focuses on the learning journey of two students. The first, Jahlile, was in Year 2 when we started and was struggling with all aspects of literacy despite having good attendance. He was at least 2 years behind his peers in spelling, reading and writing and was very reluctant to write. He has no cognitive impairment but does have difficulty controlling his impulses which causes him to rush and make mistakes.

The second student, John, was in Year 1. He also has good attendance and has achieved age-appropriate levels of literacy. He has a more confident approach to all aspects of literacy and enjoys writing.

The first TfW unit we embarked on was on report writing and students were asked to write everything they knew about dogs for their cold task.
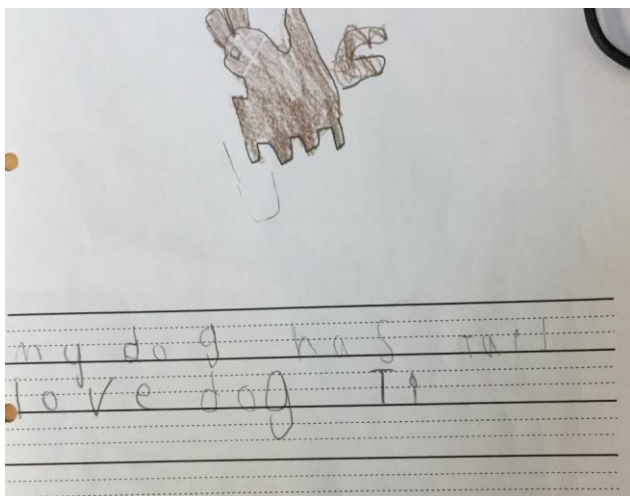

Jahlile's cold task
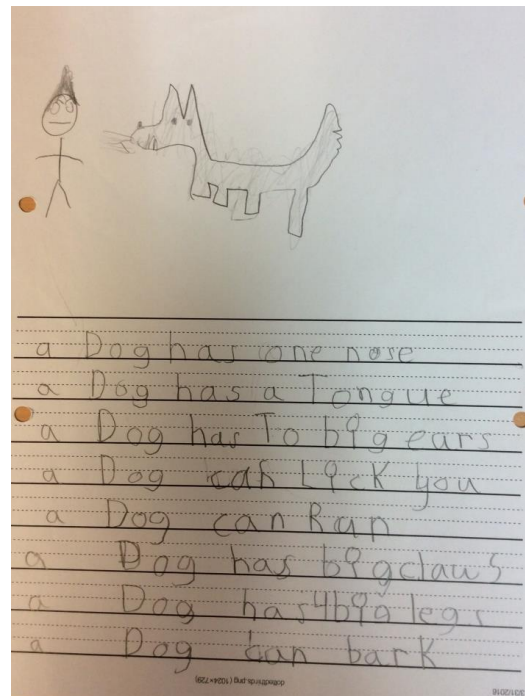
John's cold task

In both boys' writing samples there was no evidence of punctuation or understanding of the structure of an information report. Jahlile has said that his dog has a tail and he loves his dog but he has written words not sentences. John has made a repetitive list describing the appearance of his dog and what it can do.

Our focus for this unit was for the students to write using a simple report structure and to provide the reader with some factual information on a topic. We emphasised, too, the need to punctuate sentences and for our writing to make sense. Students were then introduced to the model text which was a report on aliens and were very surprised to come back from their holidays to discover that aliens had landed on the school oval. A close inspection of the oval revealed strange markings made from the landing of a rocket ship! After this experience, the students embraced the imitation phase with gusto. When it came to the innovation phase, their stories hugged very closely to the text but they were all delighted with their writing.

Jahlile has a very close relationship with his grandfather Pop Lenny and wrote his innovation about the "Lenny boy" alien and John's story was about a fictitious "Mr Bob" Alien. Both boys also hugged closely to the text and used the language patterns they learned from the model text which included questions such as "What do they look like?" Their descriptions show the boys using generalisers such as all and most. John has included the word "additionally" in his story which was in the model text.
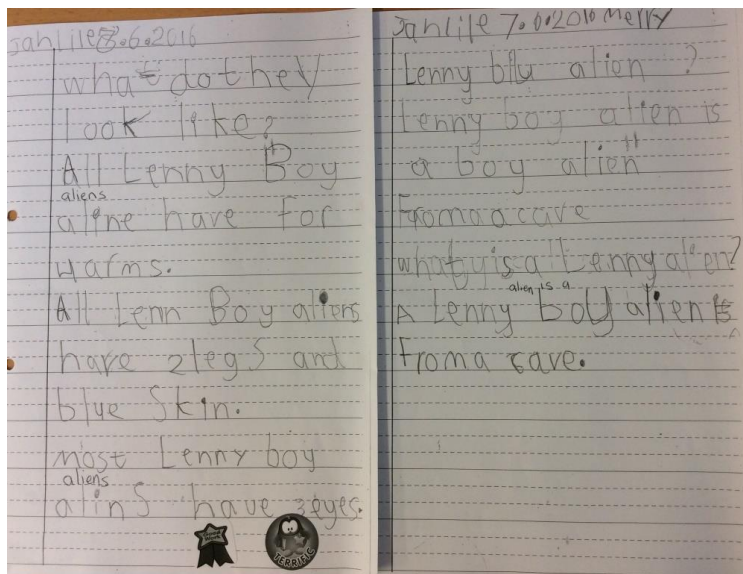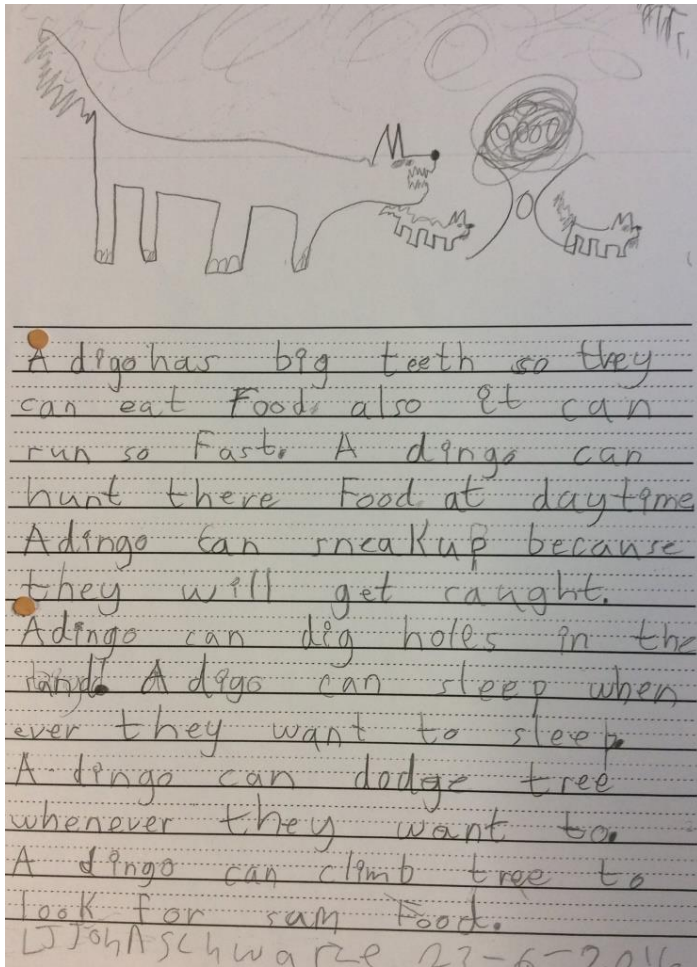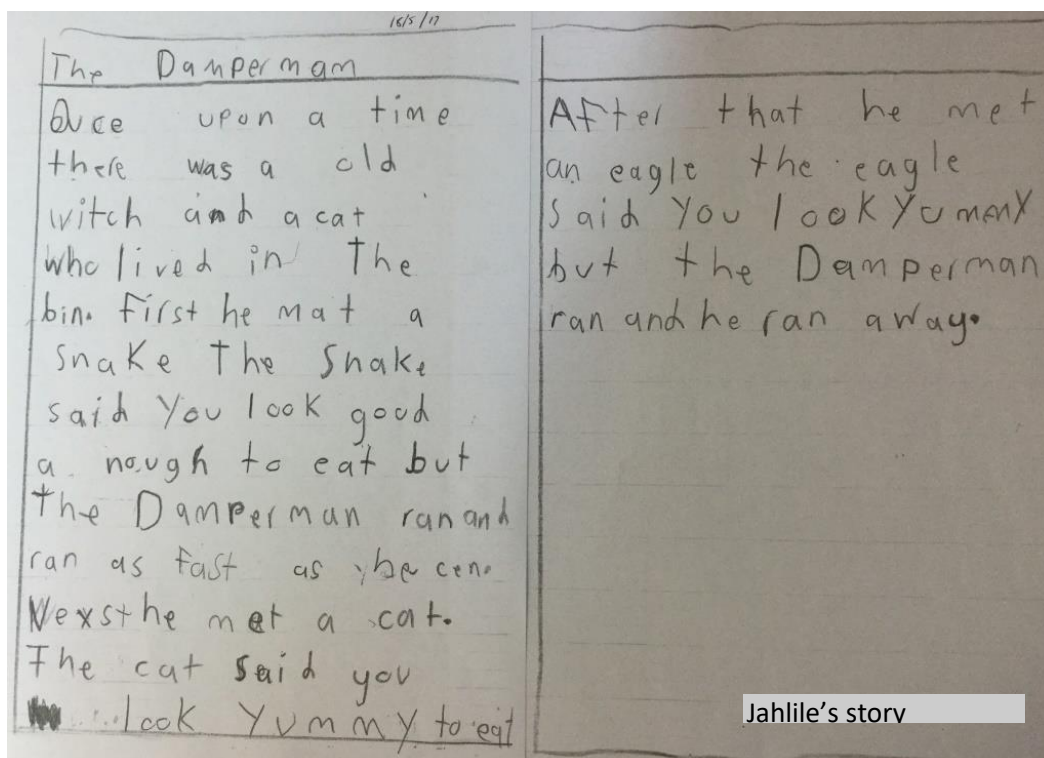

Jahlile's innovation
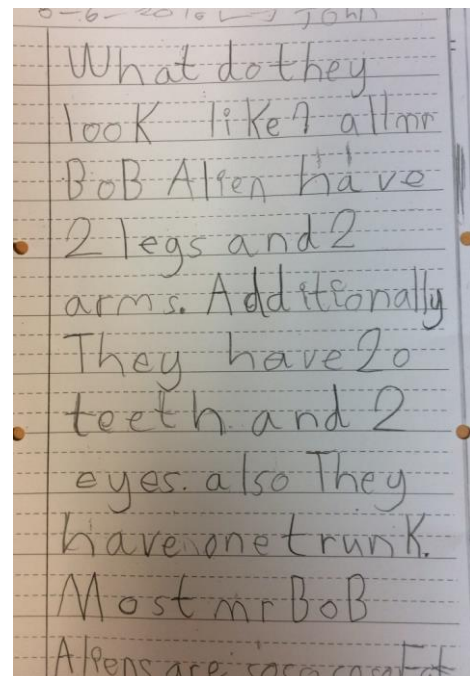
John's innovation
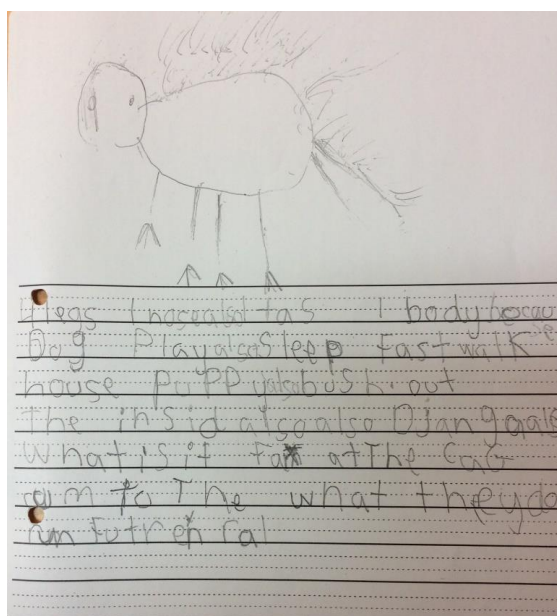
When the students wrote their hot tasks, they demonstrated greater confidence and willingness to write unaided. However, Jahlile struggled to write his ideas in complete sentences and reverted back to listing. He begins his report with 4 legs 1 nose a tail (no commas). On reflection, I think he did this because we asked him to plan his dog story by brainstorming information about a dog. However, we neglected to model how to use this planning document to assist him to write a story. So instead of helping the writing process, I think it confused him. Interestingly, he has used some of the words from the model text such as "also" and he does attempt a question- "What is it". However, he has not written in sentences and it doesn't make sense.
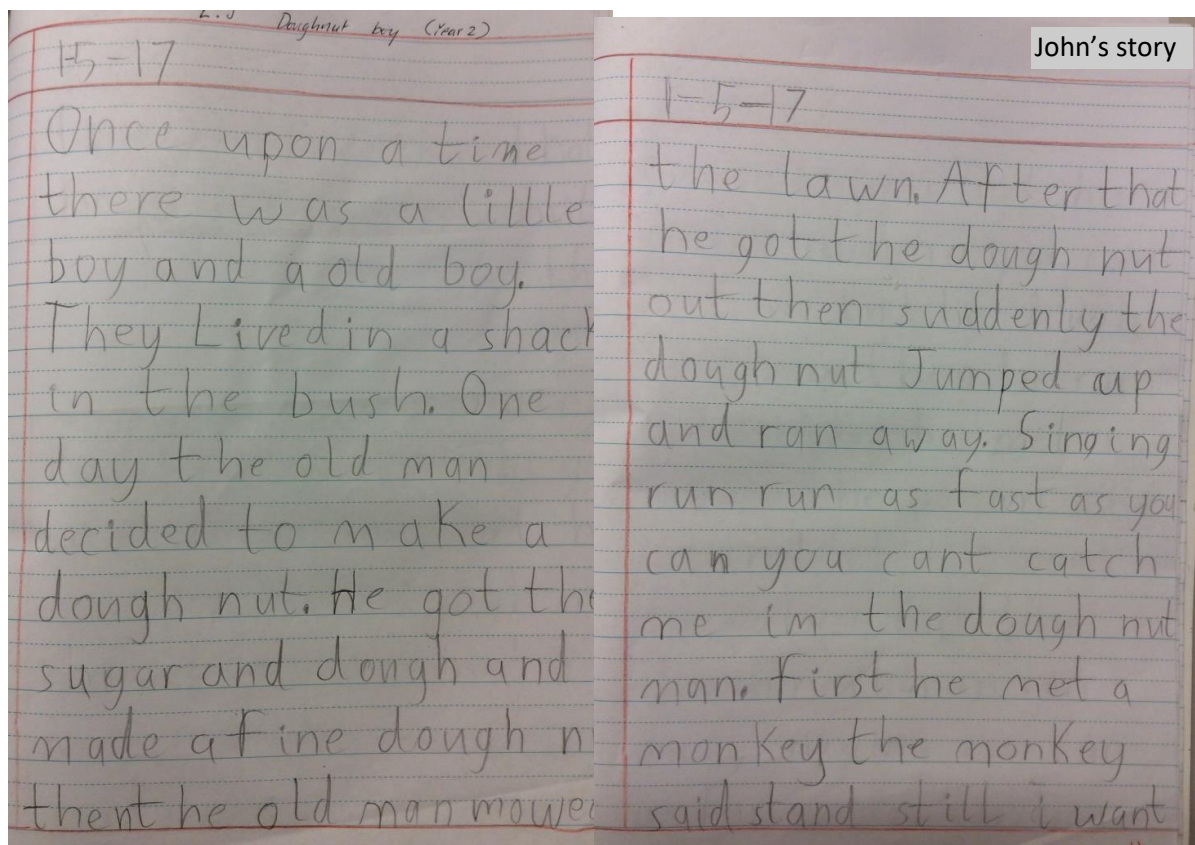
John's hot task was about a dingo (a wild native Australian dog) and while his sentences all begin with "A dingo …" he is now writing simple, compound and complex sentences. He is using punctuation correctly most of the time and has given us quite detailed factual information about a dingo. Quite an improvement!

A dingo has big teeth so they can eat Food also it can run so Fast. A dingo can hunt there Food at daytime A dingo can sneak up because they will get caught. A dingo can dig holes in the land. A dingo can sleep when ever they want to sleep. A dingo can dodge tree whenever they want to. A dingo can climb tree to look for sum Food. LJ John Schwarze 27-6-2016

We learnt a lot from our first unit and continued using the Talk for Writing approach for the rest of the year. We covered the non-fiction text forms of procedure and recount and finished the year with a fiction text *The three billy goats gruff*. We learnt that our students became confused by boxing up and we were far more successful when we used sticky notes directly onto the story maps when we innovated. We introduced sentence checkers which were a valuable tool for reminding the children to read back over their work and to check for punctuation. Our students became more proficient at writing complete sentences and identifying the structure of the text form. They became better at drawing their story maps and developed independence and confidence in writing that I would have thought impossible at the beginning.

Finally, I would like to skip forward a year and show you the boys' writing this year. Our model text was The Gingerbread Man and the students wrote their own versions of the text. Jahlile's story is about a Damper man and John's story is about a Doughnut boy and continues over a number of pages. This writing was unassisted.

The Damperman
Once upon a time there was a old witch and a cat who lived in the bin. First he mat a snake The snake said you look good a nough to eat but the Damperman ran and ran as fast as he cen. Wexst he met a cat. The cat said you look Yummy to eat

After that he met an eagle the eagle said you look Yuman but the Damperman ran and he ran away.

Jahlile's story

L.J Doughnut boy (Year 2)

15-17

Once upon a time
there was a lillle
boy and a old boy.
They Lived in a shack
in the bush. One
day the old man
decided to make a
dough nut. He got the
sugar and dough and
made a fine dough n
then the old man mowe

1-5-17

the lawn. After that
he got the dough nut
out then suddenly the
dough nut Jumped up
and ran away. Singing
run run as fast as you
can you cant catch
me im the dough nut
man. First he met a
monkey the monkey
said stand still i want

The students' use of time connectives has been a focus over almost all our units of work and is now embedded. Punctuation is more consistent, although it is apparent that we now need to focus on the correct use of speech marks. Students now reread their own writing to check that it makes sense. Our students have grown enormously in confidence and willingness to write independently and their progress over the year has been outstanding. While they continue to hug fairly closely to the model text, I expect that in the future we will see more independent and imaginative attempts at story writing.

Finally, by sharing work samples from our students, I have convinced the six other schools in our network (the Murchison Network) to adopt the Talk for Writing approach. The Murchison Network schools are similar to Pia Wadjarri in that almost all students attending are aboriginal although most schools have higher numbers. Next year, we have booked a two-day Professional Learning opportunity for all teaching staff to attend in a central location. This will require some participants to travel for more than 2 hours on unsealed roads and to stay overnight. Despite these great distances, there is a real enthusiasm from schools to come on board.