



Poetry as truth-telling from memories

I recently ran a half hour mini workshop in Warren Road Primary School, Orpington, with a class of Year 6 writers. I talked briefly about memories – that we are made of our memories – and that we were going to write using key memories that have made us who we are. I read from my notebook the following and briefly talked about some of the ideas to flesh out the stories behind the words.

The Model Poem	Where the memory came from
<i>I am sunlight bathing in the back yard where the marmalade cat is curled asleep.</i>	Our old cat sleeping in the backyard
<i>I am a thistle impossibly thrust through concrete.</i>	Thistles in the pavement
<i>I am waves curling their salty lips.</i>	On the beach at Hastings
<i>I am blue; sheer sky.</i>	Lying on the ground and looking up at the sky and clouds
<i>I am a tiger's eye burning in the mind's forest.</i>	The Tyger by William Blake
<i>I am waiting at the top of St Paul's tower .</i>	a trip to London with my Mother
<i>I am Romney Marsh and Rome.</i>	We lived near Romney Marsh and once had a holiday in Rome
<i>I am gran's cold hands clutching her knitting needles.</i>	My Gran
<i>I am the moment between a heart beat, the blink of a tear-filled eye and a sudden sigh.</i>	When my granddad died
<i>I am an enquiry.</i>	
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As I was pushed for time this all had to be brief and to the point. I pointed out that they didn't need too much embellishment and it helps to be exacting and name things as it would bring the image alive for the writer. I brainstormed with them a quick list of possible ideas and we chose 'chameleon'. I used shared writing to very rapidly create a 'verse' on the flipchart with the children contributing ideas:

Interactive Shared Writing

*I am a chameleon,
blending into the shadows,
camouflaged,
a vibrant word trick,
master conjuror of colour.*

The children then had to write their own memory ideas as rapidly as possible with as little interference from me, though I did circulate and encourage. They were writing hard and fast, focussed on their memories, searching and crafting their ideas.

Rapid independent writing by the class

*I am the murmur of summer fields,
grasping joy,
sensing a parting breath.*

*I am simplicity,
a serene blue sky,
scattered with humble clouds,
shining down on the forget-me-nots
below.*

*I am Broadstairs,
the forever fresh smell of salt,
filled with envious seagulls,
claiming fish and chips.*

*I am a wink,
an eye's smile.*

*I am my father's eyes,
smiling at me
as he gently throws the ball.*

*I am a remorseful whisper,
concealing your secrets,
letting no-one dip in
to your untold truths.*

*I am Grandad's knowledge,
telling me things he knows not to tell,
his glistening grin
as my nan comes in.*

*I am my father's songs of 1980,
coiling me in my own thoughts,
reaching out to shake my hand.*

*I am a memory,
both a friend and an enemy,
reminding of better times,
but not letting mistakes be forgot.*

*I am the reading test,
unleashing words of confusion.*

We rounded the rapid writing off with children selecting the favourite line from their partner's writing and held a mini reading. I asked Dean and Jamie, two teachers who had watched the lesson, for their thoughts.

Dean: *The lesson reinforced that all children have rich experiences to draw on. All experiences are rich - they may not be the ones that we 'value' but if they are real they should be valued. The attention to detail that real life and experience can bring is a huge resource to draw on... The fact it was first modelled by drawing on your own experiences was powerful. Not just modelling the process but modelling using your voice to compose ideas prior to capturing them on paper.*

Jamie wrote: *The session illustrated the power of the teacher being a reader and writer. You talked through your poem before reading it, explaining the choices you had made and the way they fell into categories. This allowed the children time to consider their own choices as you read, with many jotting down their own ideas and memories as you wrote.*

The power was in the honesty. It allowed the children to write about something personal and real. It reminded me of what we try to achieve through invention, letting children explore their own imagination and passions.

It once again got me thinking about the purpose of what we teach. When we talk about curriculum, it is so important that we consider the power of exploring their own lives, personalities and emotions. Modelling the power and impact of this will always be inspirational for children. It was powerful.

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