

# Sense and sensibility in the Donald Graves writing curriculum: An exploration, a remembering, and a plea<sup>1</sup>

Mem Fox

*In this inspiring address, Mem shares her memories of a great researcher and writer of children's writing, Donald Graves, and identifies five key principles of his for teachers of writing.*

## **Introduction**

Once upon a time – in 1992 – I found myself in Donald Graves' house in New Hampshire with Linda Rief, a friend of mine, who was also a friend of his. There we were at his place, taking tea with God himself, and his wife, Betty. To put me at my ease, since I was so clearly awestruck, Don said lovely things about my book *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* and asked what I was working on. I told him it was a picture book called *Time for Bed*, due for publication the following year.

'Can you recite it?' asked Betty. 'Let's hear it!'

I began to recite it but was too nervous to remember the words. I asked if I might write it down. So they set me up in Don's office with a little computer that was hot stuff at the time but can now be found only in museums.

*OMIGOD*, I thought. 'I'm in Donald Graves' actual office, typing on his actual computer'. My fingers could barely find the keys. I came downstairs again and, feeling abnormally shy, read them the words that became the book: *Time for Bed*.

Why was I so in awe of Donald Graves? So honoured to be talking about books and writing with him, and about the teaching of writing? Who was this kindly, inspiring, researcher, professor, and writer of 26 books, whose methods had had such a profound and lasting effect on Australian teachers in the early 1980s, me included? What did he ask us to do? And how was it so different from what we had done before? As I worked through the many drafts for this talk, in honour of his influence and his passing, I decided on five key points or principles that best respond to these questions.

Before Don Graves entered our heads and our classrooms we used to regard writing as a one-shot act, undertaken by students sitting in silence, and completed from beginning to end in one lesson, perhaps once a week, sometimes once a day, or for one piece of homework. The teacher gave a topic such as: 'A day in the life of a button'; or 'Finish this story,' after

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supplying the first line. The purpose was to hand it in to the teacher for correction and grading, rather than for a genuine response to the meaning. This method of teaching writing had been around for many generations, was accepted entirely as the way things should be, and was rarely questioned, although there always existed gifted, enlightened teachers working on their own, who taught writing differently.

In the early 1980s Donald Graves visited Australia several times and managed, with his famous tact and grace, and his evidenced-based research, to yank us out of our comfortable rut. He presented his research, told us a few home truths, gave us strategies and dared us to be different. We took up the challenge. In what follows I identify and explore the five key principles that I believe underpin Graves' legacy to the teaching of writing.

### **Only writers should teach writing**

The first principle is about the pedagogy of writing and this was the truth that threatened us the most. Don's research clearly demonstrated that only writers should be allowed to teach writing because writers alone understand the circumstances of creation. They know first-hand how writing happens and why. They have valid reasons for writing. They know about choosing a topic; they know about the early hunting and gathering of ideas and notes before pen finally hits paper or thumbs hit the iPhone; (well, *he* didn't actually mention texting, but he would have, had he known about it then.) Writers, he said, know about the sorting out of random information and how long it takes to get it settled into well-ordered paragraphs; and the necessity of rewriting draft after draft to get the right meaning across; and the work involved in writing an irresistible first line and a perfect set of syllables in the last line; and the anxiety over the possible response; the hope and terror involved; the intense conversations with others; the struggle to find what is called our 'voice'; the precise choosing of words; and, the desire to achieve every aim successfully, to change the reader through the reading. Writers, he said, understand the difficulty, the joy, and the power. And with that inside knowledge writers are better able to teach writing with empathy and success.

Which meant, he said, that all of us who thought we were teaching writing had better become writers ourselves: not published writers necessarily, just writers.

### ***What did we do as a result?***

Although it terrified us, we set out to discover the difference between real writing and the stuff we had been trying to teach. We did become writers ourselves. We went to writing courses, and created writing groups of our own, and met in friends' houses once

a week, and wrote for real people whom we wanted to impress. We chose our own topics. We took the time we needed. We wrote in our own voices so our individual personalities could shine through. We chatted with each other about what we were writing or had written. We read our writing aloud to each other. We experienced highs and lows, and the surprising difficulties in getting writing right. Yes, we discovered writing is difficult. We had previously scoffed at that idea when we asked our students to 'write'. We rejoiced in having real audiences and couldn't wait for their responses. Becoming writers ourselves was the best professional development ever. It changed our lives; it changed our teaching; and it radically changed the outcomes of the students in our classes.

### ***And what should we be doing now?***

So if we ourselves haven't written anything lately for an audience that makes us excited and nervous at the same time, we might have forgotten not only how to write or why, but also how to teach writing. Might it be time to start a writing group, I wonder? Many of us belong to a Book Club so why not belong to a Writing Club too?

### **Real writers are eager for collaboration**

Becoming writers helped us to remember another of Don Graves' insights, my second key principle: that real writers are eager for collaboration. They use other people's brains to help them get their writing right: family members, friends, colleagues, editors, children, neighbours, writing groups, formal writing courses, other writers' texts and so on. They seek out others in an informal sort of 'conference' to bounce their writing off, to ask advice, to check for confusions in their writing, or things they might have left out, or ways of structuring a piece, or proof-reading, or even spelling, or – secretly – in the hope of a little praise and encouragement. We learnt all this by writing ourselves. We practically dragged people off the street to read our writing to, to beg for help, for ideas on how we might improve it.

### ***What did we do in classrooms as a result?***

We tried to forget we were in classrooms. We set up pleasantly furnished physical spaces (I remember a lot of old baths with cushions in them) – social spaces that allowed children to feel more as if they were in a writer's studio, working among friends. We allowed children to talk to us and to each other about what they were writing and why. We organised writing conferences with each child to discuss the

writing in hand, allowing the child to lead the conference conversation, not the teacher. We wrote in front of children to show them our thought processes; we wrote collaboratively, with the whole class throwing in ideas; we modelled the ways writers talk about their work in progress:

- ‘What do you think of my lead? Would you want to read on or not?’
- ‘Which part did you like the best?’
- ‘What if I break that sentence into three sentences? That might work better’.
- ‘Oh, that’s so sad. I’m so sorry. Thank you for sharing’.

### ***And what should we be doing now?***

But if we ourselves haven’t written anything for a while, anything public, that is, for an audience that causes our stomachs to flutter, how will we know the power of the of-the-cuff writing conference? We won’t be able to teach writing well unless we understand the need for such chatting in our own classrooms. So let’s do something alarming such as writing a light-hearted poem that sums up the term’s work – a poem to give to the parents on the last day of term. Now *that* might teach us about writing and how to teach it.

### **Writers choose their own focus**

Donald Graves also alerted us to the fact that writers, on the whole, choose to write about their own current focus. They choose their topic. They choose their own genre. In other words, they know what they want to write and why: a journal, a letter to the paper or the Pope, a novel, a protest speech, a blog – well, *he* didn’t actually mention a blog but he would have, had he known about blogs at that time – an appeal for funds, a family history, a child’s bedtime story, an application for promotion, to name a tiny few of the hundreds of genres available.

### ***What did we do as a result?***

It was revolutionary, but we allowed children to write what they wanted to write about, what they knew about, what they cared about. We didn’t tell them the formulaic text-type they had to use, so we could all feel calm about the persuasive writing section of the NAPLAN tests. None of us, let alone eight year-old children, can write persuasively unless we have *real* steam coming out of our ears about the matter in hand. Manufactured steam just doesn’t cut the mustard. Because we were writers ourselves we remembered that kind of thing; we knew it; we felt it first hand. So we drew out from

the children what the children wanted to express instead of imposing our topics on them.

### ***And what should we be doing now?***

But what if we haven't been writers ourselves lately? What if we've forgotten how awful it is to be told what to write and exactly how to write it, if we can't recall the importance of an excited, inquisitive audience ourselves? We might like to sit back for a cool moment and take stock once again, and ask ourselves earnestly what the practice of writing really is. And whether it bears any relation to the manufactured horrors we're currently inflicting on the youngsters in our classrooms in the name of literacy education – deadly formulas on the ways of writing different text-types such as the persuasive, descriptive, narrative and so on. That's not real writing. It bears no resemblance to writing. Teaching text-types outside the context of passion and purpose, audience and response sucks the lifeblood from natural, vibrant writing and kills it stone dead. Teaching text-types is not teaching *writing* and never will be, and we're kidding ourselves if we think otherwise.

### **Real writing is a complex process**

Another important lesson that Donald Graves taught us is that real writing is a much more complex process than a one-shot act; that it is literally 'a process', a predictable series of stages and drafts that most writers undertake between their first thought and their final piece, whether the piece takes an hour, or weeks, or several years to write.

### ***What did we do in classrooms as a result?***

We said to children: 'You don't have to get it right first time. Have a go'. 'Write something, anything'. 'No, there's no special length. You can't re-draft a blank page so get something down and go from there'. 'I'll chat to you about it, never fear. I won't let you sink'. 'Are you ready to try it out on the class? OK, let's do it and see how the others can help'. 'No, you don't have to finish it right now. Put it away for a while and try something else if it's not working for you. That's what I do'. 'Can't spell that word? Invent the spelling. Write it anyway and we'll get it right later. Say what you want to say'. And this is exactly what this child did – in a letter to me:

*I want to talk about Willford Gordon whatchamacalit oh you know what.  
I like your book because a little boy did a big thing like Mr.Drysdale  
because Mr.Drysdale is big. That's all. By Roderick*

### ***And what should we be doing now?***

If we are not writers ourselves we will not know, we will not be able to understand, we will not remember that writing is a process, a slow process, an arduous process at times, requiring draft upon draft. And we might therefore teach in an asinine fashion, making ridiculous demands such as: I want this handed up by tomorrow; or: why don't you sit this NAPLAN writing test, and do your 'best writing' in the time set? To become a writer in order to be a better *teacher* of writers, we don't need to go crazy and meet our writing group once a week, although that's fun: wine, carrot cake, gossip and all. But we do need to write a minimum of one or two things a year for an audience that terrifies us. Imagine one or two staff members each week, reading a piece to colleagues at the end of a staff meeting. Imagine that sweat!

### **Writers need a purpose, an audience and a response**

Another of Don Graves's key points is that writers don't write well or willingly without an interested and inquisitive audience. He emphasised the requirement for a real audience but told us there are *three* key elements in the creation of every piece of successful written communication, from cave paintings to tweeting. (Well, *he* didn't actually mention Twitter but he would have, had he known about it then.) The three elements are audience, purpose and response. Without an audience to care about the meaning being expressed, he said, real writers don't write: what would be the point? And if the purpose is merely for grading, again real writers don't write: what would be the point? And if writers are hanging out for a genuine response to what has been written and receive no such response, they're reluctant to write for that audience again, since what would be the point?

Can you see therefore, the heart-breaking pointlessness of battering children with text-types, none of which develop passion or competence in a young writer? Audience, purpose and response: nothing else matters: text-types are chosen naturally; they arise organically, as passion and purpose surface in a writer's brain. I ask myself – and I ask you – how I am able to write in any genre I please without ever having been explicitly taught a formulaic text-type.

Those of us who were writing real things for each other on a weekly basis in writing groups back in the 80s understood exactly how important audience, purpose and response were, especially response. We lived and died for the response, not only to the meaning we were trying to get across, but also to the way we had constructed it.

***What did we do in classrooms as a result?***

We made sure that children knew their writing would be read to or by others – to a real audience of live and lively listeners so that they would write with much more care and aching and attention and excitement. We had a writer’s chair for our young writers to sit in while they read aloud their work and asked for comments or questions afterwards. We helped the writers choose their best writing and published it in little books that other children could borrow in class or take home and read to their parents. We had celebratory days for the launch of first publications with party food and a speech of congratulation from someone who mattered to the children. Audience was the spur, the purpose was for a response, and response was the reason for writing. We had no tests. We tried not to grade although, of course, we quietly and constantly assessed.

***And what should we be doing now?***

Perhaps we could ask ourselves, if we haven’t written anything lately, why that might be? Apart from journal writing which – as a solitary act of stream of consciousness written mostly for our own old age – lacks an immediate audience, we are probably not writing because we don’t have an interested or inquisitive audience in our own lives, an audience that might awaken a desire to write, to write often and to write to the best of our ability.

Perhaps we should think of something we want badly for our school, something that will have our own voice heard so loudly and clearly that the response will deliver our dreams. Like this email for example, which came to me earlier this year from a parent in a remote school in Queensland. It’s a brilliant piece of persuasive writing, filled with voice. But first let’s ask ourselves if this adult writer knows the formula of persuasive writing that we are now all obliged to teach. I bet she doesn’t even realise that such a sterile formula exists, yet what could be more successful than this?

Dear Mem

*This is most likely your first letter from Ero\*\*\*\*\*a – The furthest town from the Sea in Australia. We are far, far, far away from the big smoke in South Western Queensland and we have a very small school with five wonderful big hearted kids.*

*Like most Queensland children, they have now seen firsthand the effects of flood (the entire town was submerged to varying degrees) and unfortunately they have also seen the effects of drought.*

*In October, these five children are hoping to travel on camp to Brisbane and visit the Qld Museum, Science Centre, spend a day on one of the Queensland Police Boats etc. To make this possible, we, like all schools, have to fund raise but with only five kids, it makes it a little bit hard and let's face it, door knocking in an area like this is not really possible unless you have a pilot's licence. Now, the kids don't always miss out living out yonder, let's take the end of year Christmas play, the kids not only get a lead role but five or six...*

*A brainstorm was had by the parents and it was decided that a one-off monster raffle would be held. We plan to start the raffle in late April with the raffle rounding up in early June. We have planned various avenues of advertising including email, social media networks and flyers at local venues such as post offices, grocery stores, etc. (These local venues are 106 KM from us...)*

*So here is the big ask...donations..... Anything that could be raffled for example a mobile phone, vouchers, products (large or small), seconds/old stock and non productive staff members...well you get the drift....We are in need of a big item to draw in the crowds and I don't really want to auction my hubby (the local cop, well I do, but have been told it is illegal and then there will be a fight when the winner wants to return him and for some strange reason the house has been packed up and I can't be located) ...*

*We hope to hear from you soon and should you require further information, please contact Mel on (That is Mel...on ...not Melon but if you are willing to donate, I am fine with being called just about anything) \*\*\*\*\* alternatively, the P and C email address is \*\*\*\*\* . Contact can also be made via the Ero\*\*\*\*\*a State School on \*\*\*\*\*.*

*Thank you so much for taking the time to consider our request and we hope to hear from you soon.*

*Warmest regards,*

*The Ero\*\*\*\*\*a P and C Association*



Mel must have loved writing this piece. I certainly loved reading it and was spurred into immediate action on her behalf. Every macro and micro thing that Donald Graves taught us about writers and writing can be found in her hysterical and successful email.

### **Concluding Comments**

This talk, too, though very different, has all the hallmarks of Donald Graves' teaching. I found it difficult and challenging and took almost a month to write and re-write it. A friend asked me once how it was going and I said, 'Fine, really – it's sort of finished, but it's boring. All I have to do now is make it interesting'.

'OMIGOD', I thought, '**All** I have to do now is make it interesting'! The task seemed enormous.

What I had forgotten, in the creation of this presentation, as I forget almost every time I sit down to write, is that the writing process never changes. I had forgotten that it's never quick. It's never easy. I had also forgotten that it never fits comfortably into this text-type formula or that, whether it be, picture books or tub-thumping convention-centre protest pieces about the teaching of genre outside the context of a reality that has meaning for the child. I had forgotten, in my anxiety to get things right, the essential writers' maxim of: Why would I write if I knew what I were going to say? By writing this talk, harking back to the core of Donald Graves' work, I re-learnt what writing really is, and rediscovered a key insight as to how it might be better taught: by teachers becoming writers themselves.

I could not have written this talk had Donald Graves not touched my writing and teaching life so deeply. But here I am finally, at the end of my talk, having been carried on his wings as I paid grateful homage to his work, hoping that I have made a small difference to my audience's thinking, your teaching, your students, and your own varied lives. Thank you so much Donald Graves.

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