Rethinking KS3: A Novel Approach

A classroom research project on studying a novel with four Year 9 classes

As part of the English and Media Centre's research project on group work in English, a school in East London worked with the EMC on the teaching of a novel in Year 9. **Barbara Bleiman** reports on the findings which led the department to change its approach to KS3 English.

For 6 weeks, from September to the end of October 2018, an English department in outer London was involved in a Year 9 project for EMC's group work research, 'It's Good To Talk.' The project was designed by me and Lucy Hinchliffe, who works four days a week at the school and one day a week at EMC. It started with the department's desire to build more group work and dialogic learning into their curriculum – but soon became something much more all-encompassing. It led to a significant re-thinking in the department about what KS3 English should be offering to students and what kinds of experiences will best prepare them for GCSE without sacrificing a genuine and deep development of subject knowledge and capability.

The existing scheme of work

The department had already been teaching *In the Sea There are Crocodiles* for four or five years and had an existing scheme of work that all the teachers followed, taught largely from PowerPoint presentations. Last year the scheme was adapted to explicitly focus on preparing the students for the demands of the new Language GCSE. This is something that English departments are increasingly doing – slanting the experience of *literary* texts, both at KS3 and KS4, not only towards GCSE in general but more specifically towards addressing the specific requirements of the GCSE *Language* exam.

The new scheme involved lots of work on close language analysis and paragraph writing, looking towards each of the sections of the Language exam and as preparation for the internal assessment that forms part of the whole school data and student performance tracking. As well as focusing heavily on the GCSE requirements, the scheme had a strong contextual 'prior knowledge before reading' element, with students doing their own research on the Hazaras and Pashtuns of Afghanistan and the political context which is the impetus for the events of the novel. The teachers provided lots of scaffolding in the form of PEETAL (Point, Evidence, Explanation, Technique, Analysis, Link) and other forms of detailed support for writing. Inference was taught explicitly, using images of Afghanistan and of migrant journeys. The general classroom pattern was varied, including reading, presentation, and explanation from the front, with some open tasks and opportunities for talk. There was no creative/critical writing (such as 'writing in the style of') and it involved a significant amount of modelling of paragraph writing.

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Introducing a new scheme of work, with group work… and much more

Of the twelve teachers teaching Year 9, six continued to use the existing scheme. The other six (four groups with some shared teachers) agreed to change their scheme of work, to follow a completely different model. Though taken on by the teachers and developed by them in their own way, it came to be known by everyone as 'the EMC way'. In the first instance, Lucy and I were hoping to build in group work, as a way of testing what difference it might make to the learning for the students. However, from very early on in the project it became quite clear that this focus on group work was radically and dramatically changing the whole nature of the study of a class novel.

In trials of classroom pedagogy, there is often an attempt to isolate out one intervention to prove its efficacy. At EMC we have been sceptical about the viability of doing this in such context-bound, complex, organic places as classrooms, and in our work with these Year 9 classes, this very much proved to be the case. The shifts in thinking that occurred went way beyond just 'teaching from the front versus group work', as I hope this article reveals. Equally, in classrooms, teachers gave the scheme their own inflection, classes responded differently, and some teachers retained some elements of previous practice, whilst others 'went the whole hog' with changing the approach.

Despite these caveats, it seemed that, for the teachers involved, a whole new set of understandings emerged about what it means to teach a class novel. For the students, as their writing and their evaluative questionnaires at the end of the unit show, the scheme also involved a significant shift in thinking – in some cases, a revelatory one – about what studying texts in English might involve.

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What were the key differences in 'the EMC way'?

Here, in brief, are some aspects of the changes that the new scheme of work brought by comparison with the school's original scheme of work. (*Links to fuller documentation can be found on the blog on EMC's website*).

At an initial meeting in advance of starting the scheme, the teachers talked with me about what key literary and linguistic understandings and ideas were of central interest in this book; they identified significant aspects of the text. These included, among other things: its genre-mixing of fact and fiction; its structure as an 'odyssey', in which the trials and tribulations of the protagonist are described; its powerful emotional impact; its raising of many themes around migration, freedom and oppression; its rich use of a developing and changing symbolism. These were going to be at the forefront of the teachers' minds while presenting the text in their lessons.

They tried out a 'taster' of the first lessons that would set up the new way of working, to give them confidence in the approach and the kind of issues and ideas about the book that might emerge in the classroom. The meeting ended with a shared understanding of key issues about the book itself.

A flexible, responsive scheme

The scheme of work was flexible. Each lesson was mapped out in basic terms but teachers were asked to adapt, slow down and speed up, and make choices of activity according to what they saw happening in the classroom and how well their students were coping both with the book and with their new ways of working. In other words, the scheme was a responsive framework, not a rigid schedule.

A developing, shared agenda

At the heart of the work was the idea of a developing, shared 'agenda' about the novel, that anchored all the work back to a sense of what we had agreed to be most interesting and significant about it – the *characteristic* features of this text. The agenda was not 'presented' to the class by the teacher but came out of the class work as a form of shared thinking, being adapted as it went. Students were encouraged to add their own ideas and think for themselves about what was important in the text.

However, there was also a strong underpinning in the work the teachers had done in the planning meeting to establish a shared sense of what the students should come away with as a result of reading this text. These were concepts and ideas for the students to take forward into all future work on novels. The teachers were encouraged to feed in ideas, encourage connections to be made and prompt thinking that would get to the heart of key elements in the novel. Their role in the classroom work was vital.

A significant element of group work

Group work formed a significant part of the work, but not necessarily in whole lessons, or all of the time – rather as a way of exploring ideas raised by the teacher, or raising new issues first in groups as a prelude to class discussion, or individual writing. Much of it happened in intense little bursts – ten or fifteen minutes with a requirement to choose something, decide something, agree something, argue through something. Some teachers did more extended group activities along the way and there was an opportunity to reflect afterwards on whether these longer activities, stretching over a whole lesson or even more than one lesson, were the most successful elements of group work or not.

No explicit assessment preparation

Though the teachers knew that the students would be assessed on the basis of a test that would mirror the GCSE Language paper, (an unavoidable school requirement), they agreed not to put any emphasis on this in their teaching, nor to specifically prepare the students for the demands of the assessment. There was no 'now you're studying this in order to be able to answer this question at GCSE, or in your assessment'. The reading of the book, the discussion and the writing about it were all for their own sake –

a good enough reason to be working hard on the text. All of the teachers agreed that they would not teach PEETAL or focus written work on 'paragraph writing'.

Broad, open writing opportunities

When the students wrote more formally about extracts from the text – drawing on their understandings of the book as a whole – the titles they were given were broad and open, along the lines of 'What, in this extract, is characteristic of the book as a whole?', encouraging them to apply their knowledge of the writer's style and the themes and experiences he is revealing to the reader. This was in stark contrast to the narrower, more specific questions that students in the 'control' group were asked to address (for example 'Write a PEETAL paragraph about a sentence from the text'.

What happened? 1: Positive impact on teachers

Within a week or two of teaching, several of the 'EMC way' teachers reported that they had decided to re-write their schemes of work for their KS4 and KS5 classes, to adopt the 'agenda' approach and a more open dialogic approach to *An Inspector Calls* at KS4 and *Wuthering Heights* at KS5. The reasons for this? Teachers reported a greater interest from students, a surprise at how much their students could contribute, and a sense that they themselves were much clearer about the rationale for focusing on one thing rather than another in the study of a novel. The scene by scene, or chapter by chapter, approach was not entirely dismissed but was overlaid with 'big picture' ideas about the texts that were debated and discussed in the classroom.

In interim feedback and then in more detailed questionnaires at the end of the scheme and in a department meeting, the teachers were positive about the impact, both for them and their classes. Some key points that emerged were:

Behaviour

Some had feared that behaviour would be worse with more group work. None found this to be the case, though one teacher qualified this with concerns about behaviour in more extended discussion activities.

Teacher D, who was particularly nervous of the whole approach, reported that she was pleasantly surprised at how well the group work went and that the behaviour of students was in fact better than in previous work with the class: '*I think the group work element worked well for this, as did the discussion work – less chaotic than I imagined! They were interested to hear each other's ideas.*'

Some of the teachers who had changed the arrangement of tables and chairs in their classroom just for the half term working on this text decided to keep their classroom like this for subsequent lessons and in different classrooms.

Engagement and response to literary issues

The teachers reported noticing how much more engaged their students were and expressed some surprise at the level at which students were operating and how quickly they were becoming confident with concepts (and associated vocabulary) that were being lightly and easily introduced in the class, concepts like 'narrative arc', 'voice', 'rites of passage novel', 'symbolism', 'characteristic features' and so on.

Thinking about the text – and thinking beyond the classroom

Lucy noted, early in the project, how her students were taking their thinking out of the classroom after the lessons. One very quiet girl stopped to question her at the end of one lesson, raising an issue that hadn't been dealt with to her satisfaction in class. Lucy made this question a feature of the start of the following lesson.

Students seemed to be taking the book and the ideas to heart. Quiet students were coming out of their shells. I observed the lesson in which this particular student's question was explored with the whole class and saw her working in a group, initially tentatively but by the end of the group work, engaging in a focused and intense debate about an aspect of the book with another student, a boy, with whom she then went on to develop a friendship, seemingly as a result of talking together in class.

In the department meeting, Teacher A identified students having to 'think' as being the most significant shift in the new approach. Teacher B's evaluation also highlighted that students were having the opportunity to 'think about why a writer crafts their writing in the way that they do'.

The power of exploratory talk – and exploratory writing

Exploratory talk was coupled with exploratory writing. This was particularly evident in some of the classes. Students were encouraged to write down their thoughts, without pre-planning, sentence openers, formulae or any other explicit structure. The questions they were encouraged to think about were high level ones, by any standards – the kind of literary ideas that would not be out of place in A Level classrooms.

So, for instance, in the early lesson of Lucy's that I witnessed she wanted to address the issue of the book being an amalgam of fact and fiction – a true story told as fiction by a journalist, who kept reminding us, at a meta-narrative level, about the way the story was being told.

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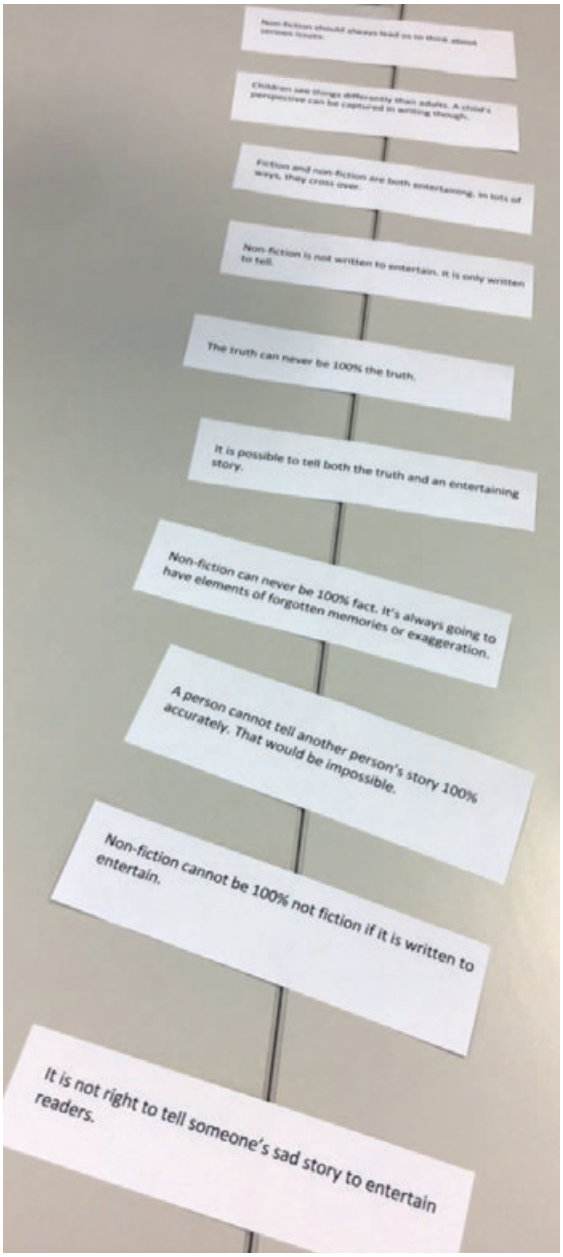
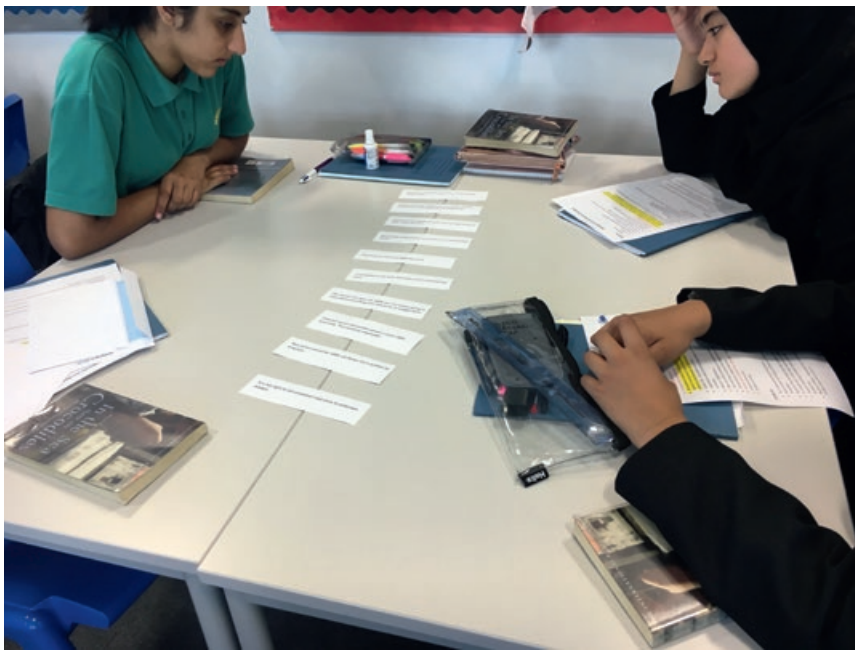




"The teachers in some of the classes were surprised by how much students were writing, and the care and thoughtfulness with which they approached their writing. Lucy identified writing in homework, in particular, as qualitatively and quantitatively better – a significant shift emerging from this way of working."

She gave the students 8–10 statements about fact and fiction. Having modelled it herself on a different statement not included in their selection, she asked them to talk about which they agreed with and found most interesting. The statements were ones like 'Non-fiction is not written to entertain. It is only written to tell.', 'Non-fiction can never be 100% fact. It's always going to have elements of forgotten memories or exaggeration' and 'Children see things differently than adults. A child's perspective can be captured in writing though'. Having talked in groups, individuals then wrote their thoughts about the statements, followed by class discussion. They rose to the challenge and having chosen different statements led to individual responses, rather than identical, pre-taught ones.

The teacher evaluations identified opportunities to write 'I think' and 'I like' as particularly powerful and a 'legitimate' way of getting them to be analytical. Teacher C said: '*It's funny how removing the scaffolding of PEE actually seems to make it easier for some students to express themselves and build interesting arguments.*'

The power of creative and creative/critical writing

The EMC classes all did some creative/critical writing – writing an extra chapter, or an episode from their own lives, in the style of the novel. This produced some excellent writing, that showed a depth of understanding of Geda's style, particularly when it was set up with a clear set of 'success criteria' reminding students of key elements of the style of the original text, followed by peer assessment using this list of elements. In their questionnaire responses, both teachers and pupils referred to this kind of activity as being particularly enjoyable and valuable. Teacher B talked about this '*allowing the students to...think deeper into how and why writers make certain decisions.*'

What happened? 2: Student writing – impact of the change in pedagogy

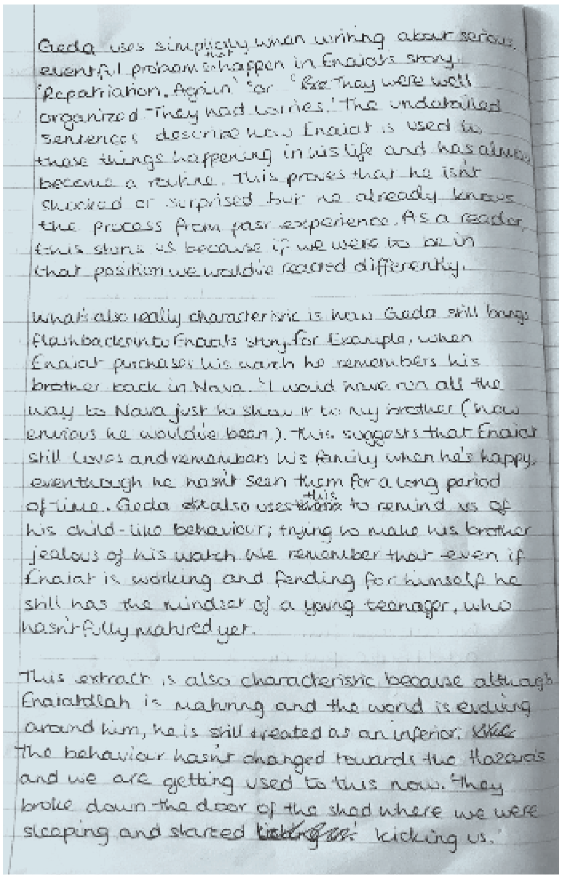
I did a detailed analysis of the writing in four exercise books from two classes – one an EMC group, the other not. The two teachers of the four students were both very experienced practitioners whose classes were working diligently throughout the scheme. Two high ability boys and two high ability girls were chosen in each class, so that the work of students of a similar standard was being compared. My analysis included a statistical look at full paragraphs written and amount of sustained writing. It found some key differences in the writing, outlined briefly below.

I also gave the student writing to Anne Turvey, for many years a PGCE tutor at the Institute of Education with a special interest in writing. She did an independent write-up of her observations on the student writing in these same four exercise books, without reference to my analysis. We drew very similar conclusions about the significant differences in the nature of the writing.

This brief summary identifies some of the most interesting aspects of the writing that we compared, and the teachers' own thoughts about it.

At length and in depth

In reading their work, the teachers in some of the EMC classes were surprised by how much students were writing, and the care and thoughtfulness with which they approached their writing. Lucy identified writing


Geda uses simplicity when writing about serious, eventful problems that happen in Enaiat's story. 'Repatriation. Again' or 'They were well organized. They had lorries.' The undetailed sentences describe how Enaiat is used to those things happening in his life and has already become a routine. This proves that he isn't shocked or surprised but he already knows the process from past experience. As a reader this stuns us because if we were to be in that position we would've reacted differently.

What's also really characteristic is how Geda still brings flashbacks into Enaiat's story. For Example, when Enaiat purchases his watch he remembers his brother back in Nava. 'I would have run all the way to Nava just to show it to my brother (how envious he would've been).' This suggests that Enaiat still loves and remembers his family when he's happy, even though he hasn't seen them for a long period of time. Geda also uses this to remind us of his child-like behaviour; trying to make his brother jealous of his watch. We remember that even if Enaiat is working and fending for himself he still has the mindset of a young teenager, who hasn't fully matured yet.

This extract is also characteristic because although Enaiatollah is maturing and the world is evolving around him, he is still treated as an inferior. The behaviour hasn't changed towards the Hazaras and we are getting used to this now. 'They broke down the door of the shed where we were sleeping and started kicking us.'

in homework, in particular, as qualitatively and quantitatively better – a significant shift emerging from this way of working. The writing in the exercise books reflects this, as the example above, which is just one part of a much longer essay, shows. Though the 'non-EMC' books show lots of work, much of it is in the form of short notes, responses to questions, filling in charts, exploding quotations and annotating. There is less sustained writing, constructing a line of thought or argument. My statistical analysis corroborates this.

Big picture thinking versus small detail

What the students chose to write about was as different from the 'non-EMC' groups' writing as *how* they went about the process of writing, the *quantity* and *nature* of the writing. In terms of content, they were looking at big issues and large concepts about narrative, exploring their own responses and thinking more broadly about questions of reader response, focusing on whole text thematic and structural developments, overarching ideas about the impact of the writer's choices and significant aspects of the writers' style. They ranged across the text, as well as looking at specific details. The idea of small detail being at the service of big ideas had taken root, by contrast with the 'non-EMC' students who did little of this kind of 'big picture thinking' about texts and were much more closely focused on small 'devices' and 'techniques' in isolation.

Student confidence and independence – thinking about texts

It was interesting to observe how in their exercise books students in the EMC groups chose their own ground, identified their own examples and evidence, and were required to make judgements about what to focus on. By contrast, in the other groups, the students all tended to do work on exactly the same quotations. Much of the work therefore focused on just a handful of sentences that the students hadn't selected for themselves – in one case, just three or four individual sentences across the whole novel. Teacher A, one of the 'EMC' teachers, observed in the final department meeting that the key difference was that the students were having to 'think' about the text. We agreed that this was a key change.

What happened? 3: Student enjoyment and learning

In their evaluations, the students were asked whether they had enjoyed the book more, the same, or less than previous novels in Year 7–9. They were also asked whether they had enjoyed the style of learning more, the same, or less, and a similar question was put to them about what they had learned. There was some variation in this but overall we noted a positive response to the changed ways of working and an even more positive response about how they felt they had learned.

Some students clearly felt that the removal of procedural tasks like 'PEETAL' paragraphs was harder, perhaps less contained and therefore more anxiety-provoking. However, this was a minority view. The majority commented explicitly on how much they enjoyed *not* doing PEETAL. Some students weren't very aware of the change in approach, while others could articulate what was different in ways that corresponded closely with our own thinking about the significant changes from previous work on a novel.

Overall scores for the 122 students involved in the 'EMC' scheme

65 liked the way of studying more	*(53%)*
46 liked the way of studying about the same	*(38%)*
11 liked the way of studying less	*(9%)*
76 thought they'd been learning more	*(62%)*
35 thought they'd been learning about the same	*(29%)*
6 thought they'd been learning less	*(5%)*
5 didn't respond to that question	*(4%)*

What was interesting was not only the positive scores on the style of learning but also what they chose to write about on the questionnaires by way of explanation. In the most enthusiastic class, where 87% enjoyed it more, 13% about the same and 0% less, in expanding on their answers what they said itself reflected how much deep thinking they had done about the text itself. This went well beyond routine replies. For instance, many students referred to 'Geda's writing style', or identified specific (and recognisable) elements in the text that they had enjoyed learning about.

Of course, for some students a sudden shift to asking them to make judgements, debate ideas and think for themselves was not always easy. Interestingly, some of the few students who said they'd enjoyed the way of working less identified their reason as being associated with the group work, but then also thought that they had learned more than in previous work at KS3. Thinking is perhaps harder than following a set formula or procedure, with everything spelled out for you.

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What happened? 4: Boys doing better?

An unexpected outcome was that some teachers noticed a marked shift in the work of boys. The school has identified boys' achievement as a concern, so it was particularly interesting to them to discover that the boys, especially those who should be high achievers, were responding with special commitment and energy to this new way of working. This ran counter to some of the prevailing thinking in the school, that boys needed extra structure and limited activities that kept them tightly to task.

There was also a feeling that boys' behaviour might cause problems in relation to the group work. What emerged was quite the opposite. In the meeting, some of the teachers commented on particularly difficult boys who had begun to engage more with the work. The boys who were capable of high achievement were most marked in their changed response.

Comparing students' writing in the 'EMC' groups with the 'Non-EMC' groups highlighted this in concrete terms. In fact, when I went in to read across exercise books with Lucy, I often mistook boys' writing for that of girls, because of my own false stereotypes and preconceptions that only girls write with such expansiveness, and care. The boys, when given more open tasks involving explaining their ideas, or developing responses, seemed to relish the opportunity to control the process for themselves more than was usually the case.

In past research studies on boys and achievement there have been mixed messages and contradictory ideas about boys benefitting from structure but equally being frustrated by too much rigidity, lack of choice and the loss of opportunities to put their own stamp on the work. Caroline Daly's 'Literature search on improving boys' writing' of 2002 remains a useful overview of these and other issues (**http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/4781**). Our project seems to offer some small-scale evidence of what can happen when the balance tips more towards ownership of ideas and away from tight control.

What's in it for students and teachers? Lucy's Top Ten Takeaways

At the end of the project, Lucy wrote a short summary (*see below*) of the 10 most significant things that she thought she had discovered as a teacher during the project. This provides a succinct summary of some of insights that she, and the department, will be taking away from the project and will perhaps allow others to consider what this approach can offer.

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Lucy Hinchliffe's Top Ten Takeaways

1. Students can generate ideas themselves.
With the right teacher planning, questions and guidance along with some rich material, it's surprising just how original and articulate your students can be.

2. The teacher doesn't always have the right answer. They're not the only expert in the room.
Moments of brilliance spoken by one student can lead to your next lesson's planning. Studying a text is a joint venture as a class and valuing students' ideas (not completely uncritically, of course) as much as your own is crucial.

3. Talking about texts improves confidence. Improved confidence in talking about texts means improved confidence in writing about texts.
It might be cheesy but I've seen it with my own eyes – quiet pupils gaining the confidence to make their voices heard and the superior quality of the writing that comes from testing out their ideas verbally first.

4. Boys (and girls) like to explore.
Boys don't just like 'a clear structure' and they aren't just 'motivated by competitiveness' which are some of the typical narratives delivered in CPD about boys' learning. In fact, boys enjoy exploratory talking and writing, they enjoy being asked their opinion and what they like. And, when asked to write about it, they produce some brilliant pieces. So do girls, incidentally.

5. Teaching off-scheme isn't a crime – the opposite in fact.
What's so bad about off-roading when it's productive? If your department, like mine, shares schemes of work, that doesn't mean we shouldn't be responsive to what happens in lessons, and play on what students have found interesting to take a little detour. Detours are sometimes where the most important learning happens.

6. Learning happens when pupils think.
Maybe not the most surprising of statements, but one that's really struck home for me. Scaffolding to the point of removing the thinking does not a learning student make.

7. Creative writing is a fantastic way in to critical writing.
In getting to know and understand a writer and what is special about their work, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery (and one of the most useful lead-ups to critical writing).

8. PEE, PEA, PETAL, PEETAL structures are limiting.
And by limiting, I mean in length, scope and ideas. Students find it difficult to communicate their ideas in this structure because in a lot of cases, it's not idea-focused. When you free them from this, that's where the magic happens.

9. Group work doesn't mean 'get on with this without my help or involvement'.
Quite the contrary, in fact. It needs careful planning and structuring to pull it off. It requires a confident teacher who knows where they want pupils to be by the end of the lesson and a clear idea of the interventions and shaping needed to get them there.

10. 'Group work' isn't some odd, once-in-a-while thing.
It's continuous and evolving. It's not 'let's do groupwork today', it's 'which parts of my lesson today will benefit from group work or talk, and which won't?' and 'where should I position this group work for maximum impact for my students' learning?' then 'what next?'