



**Queensland University of Technology**  
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[Ryan, Mary E. & Kettle, Margaret A.](#) (2012) Re-thinking context and reflexive mediation in the teaching of writing. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 35(3), pp. 287-300.

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This is the author version published as:

[Ryan, Mary E.](#) & [Kettle, Margaret A.](#) (2012) Re-thinking context and reflexive mediation in the teaching of writing. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*. (In Press)

This paper calls for a renewed focus on the teaching of writing. It proposes a conceptual model, based on a social realist perspective, which takes account of the ways in which teachers reflexively mediate personal, professional and political considerations in enacting their writing pedagogies. This model extends understanding of the factors contextualising the teaching of writing. It also provides a useful guide for research into the teaching of writing and a prompt for reflexivity in professional development.

# **Re-thinking context and reflexive mediation in the teaching of writing**

## **Abstract**

*This paper calls for a renewed focus on the teaching of writing. It proposes a conceptual model, based on a social realist perspective, which takes account of the ways in which teachers reflexively mediate personal, professional and political considerations in enacting their writing pedagogies. This model extends understanding of the factors contextualising the teaching of writing. It also provides a useful guide for research into the teaching of writing and a prompt for reflexivity in professional development.*

## **Introduction**

The educational value of writing as a mode of communication cannot be overstated; it lies in the dual function of producing knowledge while promoting thinking, analysis, and learning. Writing allows us to bring something into existence, from where 'we can freeze it, attend to it, and take it in as a whole' (Halliday, 1985, p. 97). In the face of concerns about the adequacy of teachers' literacy pedagogies (Masters, 2009) and separate concerns about initiatives which establish teacher standards in literacy teaching and in pre-service teaching (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011; Department of Education and Training (DET), 2009), it is timely to identify key influences on the teaching of writing, and to provide a conceptual basis for a fresh approach to the teaching of writing.

Internationally, calls for a renewed focus on the teaching of writing (Applebee & Langer, 2009; National Commission on Writing, 2006) have been argued in response to the findings of a number of studies, including the potential impact of standardised assessment programs (Kelly, 2005), the gatekeeping role of writing skills in workplaces (National Commission on Writing, 2005) and the views of teenagers using electronic communication. In a recent study, Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, and Macgill (2008) found that teenagers were regular users of e-

communication but disassociated it from writing. The teenage participants in their research considered writing an essential skill for success and wanted more guided instruction in writing at school. Unfortunately, writing is the victim of time for both students and teachers. In the US, the National Commission on Writing (2003) has identified four challenges in the teaching of writing: (i) the need to recognise time as a key dimension of writing (ii) the need to develop assessment mechanisms that understand writing as a protracted process of planning, producing, revising and editing texts; (iii) the importance of integrating new technologies into the processes of writing; and (iv) the need to develop and disseminate approaches to and methods for teaching writing, including for NESB students.

In Australia, poor academic writing skills among school-leavers entering university (including paragraphing, vocabulary use, sentence structure, cohesion and attention to audience and purpose) have been identified (Goodfellow & Lea, 2005; Rose & McClafferty, 2001; Ryan, 2010), raising concerns about the school preparation of students for writing across contexts. This is despite the inclusion of systematic writing skills in the school curriculum across all Australian states and territories since at least the early nineties, notably in subject English.

This paper begins with a review of key research findings in writing over recent years. The review is followed by a theorisation of new positions on the teaching of writing, particularly the interplay between teachers' individual, subjective considerations around their knowledge about and approaches to writing and the objective circumstances within which they teach writing. These subjective and objective influences are elaborated in relation to teacher knowledge and contextual influences in contemporary times. We characterize context here (after Seddon, 1994) as connections and constitutive relationships between teachers, schooling, curriculum, pedagogy, educational policy and politics, leading to

particular kinds of practices. Finally, we propose a conceptual model that takes account of the ways in which teachers reflexively mediate personal, professional and political considerations in the teaching of writing. Reflexive mediation refers to the ways in which teachers weigh up, manage, and act upon these considerations in the classroom. This model extends understanding of the factors contextualising the teaching of writing. It also provides a useful guide for research into the teaching of writing and a prompt for reflexivity in professional development.

### **Writing and the teaching of writing**

Research and commentary related specifically to students' writing and the teaching of writing over the past decade (see for example Levy, 1996; Ivanic, 2004; Turvey, 2007) have focused largely on student advocacy and on the pedagogical approaches that teachers use, should use, or seem unable to use. Most recently, Macken-Horarik, Love and Unsworth (2011) argue that teachers need new kinds of knowledge about language or a metalanguage for describing how language does its work in both traditional and emerging text forms. They explore the challenges of embedding a grammatically-informed metalanguage or what they term 'grammatics' in school English, particularly in the context of the Australian Curriculum for English. These challenges concern the development of the professional knowledge base of teachers, how to use this knowledge to improve students' writing and understandings of language in a cumulative way across the years of schooling, and the application of this knowledge to texts which include linguistic and non-linguistic resources for making meaning. Increasing research evidence shows that graduating pre-service teachers' knowledge of language is fragmented and lacks depth (Cutler & Graham, 2008; Harper & Rennie, 2009; Macken-Horarik, 2009), making it more difficult to diagnose students' linguistic needs in writing. Macken-Horarik and colleagues highlight a crucial consideration in the teaching of writing, that deep linguistic knowledge and an ability to analyse the

language and textual features of written genres can markedly improve teachers' and students' development and (self) assessment of writing (see Christie, 2005; Christie & Dreyfus, 2007). Much of the research in this area uses a Hallidayan (1978) approach to language, and thus makes a strong case for a focus on meaning over form in the first instance (see Harris, Fitzsimmons, & McKenzie, 2004; Macken-Horarik, 2009; Quinn, 2004). The understanding is that language choices are embedded in and respond to the particular social and cultural context and are used to achieve a particular purpose with an intended audience. There is, however, some debate about the teaching strategies best able to realise this and other approaches to writing, and whether writing is given enough attention in contemporary classrooms, as outlined below.

Ivanic (2004) offers a useful summary of the discourses related to writing and their respective beliefs about language, learning to write, and teaching approaches. She identified six discourses from a range of policy documents, teaching and learning materials, teacher and student interviews, and media coverage. These are: a skills discourse, a creativity discourse, a process discourse, a genre discourse, a social practices discourse, and a socio-political discourse. She 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. These discourses are also evident in the academic literature on writing.

Huxford (2004), for example, is a proponent of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) in the UK, which she suggests has helped teachers to understand what students should know and be able to do in relation to textual organisation, sentence construction, use of vocabulary and spelling. She advocates a well-structured functional (genre) approach to the teaching of writing, with explicit scaffolding of skills by teachers at every step of the composing process.

Others, such as Myhill (2009) and Levy (1996) foreground the importance of scaffolding through metacognitive strategies in the process of writing. These authors particularly focus on the translation process as students move from mental ideas and representations to written text production. Myhill (2009) illustrates the different composing patterns that students demonstrate, and warns that process writing has now been institutionalised as a programmatic approach to writing (she cites the NLS as an example) which assumes all students undertake the composing process in similar ways. In the US, Applebee and Langer (2009) similarly caution against a reductionist approach to writing, given the on-demand, traditional nature of standardised testing programs in writing (such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in the USA). They suggest that testing regimes do not test all that our students need to know for developing their writing skills (see also Unsworth & Chan, 2009 in relation to Australian testing programs), and that teachers must take a balanced view of writing and give it the time it needs in the curriculum.

Turvey (2007) similarly criticises some of the practices which have stemmed from the NLS in the UK. She argues that too much attention to forms and features of writing dictated by external strategies and assessment systems (such as NLS) has led to a corresponding neglect of the importance of developing the writer's ideas and the establishment of a relationship with the reader. She recounts examples where students 'hijack' the supposed social purpose of a text type in the classroom to take control of social relations with peers and construct individual and social identities in that space. Turvey (2007) cites this example to illustrate the shortcomings of a genre or 'framework' approach to teaching writing. This approach doesn't account for the underlying discourses in students' work that convey their positionings in the classroom and/or power struggles with both teachers and peers played out in the social practices of writing. Cormack and Green (2007) also highlight the importance of analysing the discourses around particular social, cultural and political issues to which students have

access (particularly through curriculum and classroom practices) which, they argue, shape the discourses in students' writing. Harris, Fitzsimmons and McKenzie (2004) outline an approach to teaching writing based on Luke and Freebody's (1999) *Four Resources Model* of literacy, along with Moll and Gonzalez's (1994) *Funds of Knowledge* and Bourdieu's (1991) ideas about social and cultural capital and habitus. Harris and colleagues have attempted to outline a social model of writing which encompasses each of the discourses outlined by Ivanic (2004), and foregrounds the context of situation and the context of culture, both of which influence the type of writing undertaken in the classroom and the discourses evident in such writing.

Of interest to us, and seemingly a void in this literature, are the ways in which teachers mediate their beliefs, knowledge and approaches to writing and learning how to write, with the circumstances and contexts in which this teaching must take place. How do we understand how teachers mediate the personal, professional and political demands of teaching writing in contemporary times? What kinds of pedagogies ensue from the different ways in which teachers mediate these demands? In the following section, we posit a more complex and comprehensive way of understanding teachers' work in relation to the teaching of writing. To this end, we build a framework utilising the concepts of context, mediation and reflexivity, and link them to teacher knowledge and pedagogic action.

## **New positions: The mediation of context, reflexivity and teacher practice**

### **Conceptualising context**

Context has increasingly gained recognition as central to the contemporary educational experience (Seddon, 1994). It provides a way of seeing the world and establishing action; it is seen as crucial to the practice of educational transformation. Yet despite this interest, context



is rarely the focus of inquiry, and is often used as a catch-all term for non-specific elements (Seddon, 1994). Indeed, context is an ambiguous term and understood in different ways. In her work on context in the theory and practice of education, Seddon (1994) argues that context has become significant because the educational experience itself has become one marked by constant changes in context. It is not the relationships between teachers and students that are changing but rather the 'milieu, institutional matrix and medium of meaning within which educational practice occurs' (p. 6) that is shifting dramatically. She argues that contextual change in schooling is a palpable reality that impacts participants as a tangible force. As an experience, it presents new sets of constraints and opportunities in which context is no longer background, to be taken for granted. Rather, '(i)t is forced to the front of educators' attention and is central to their lived experience' (p. 6).

Seddon (1994, p.28) defines two ways of seeing context: (1) which focuses on things or categories as separate entities, within set relationships to each other; and (2) which focuses on practices and understands them as constantly being constituted and transformed through encounters between the practices themselves and the discursive, social and institutional settings, in other words the social structures, in which they occur. For the purposes of our model, we are interested in the second conceptualisation of context. It provides understandings of context as connections and constitutive relationships between teachers, schooling, curriculum, pedagogy, educational policy and politics.

### **Context and processes of mediation**

Margaret Archer's (1995, 2007) approach to realist social theory provides a useful framework to understand the ways in which teachers manage competing influences and deliberate about pedagogic action in the teaching of writing. She argues that social structures or contextual forms (for example 'normal' ways of doing things) are always transformable but

always constrained as they take shape from, and are formed by, agents. In proposing an analytical method whereby structure and agency are seen as separate rather than conflated, she argues for their complementarity rather than their counteraction. For Archer (2007, 2010), the interplay and interconnection between individuals and social structures is crucial to understand courses of action produced by subjects (teachers) through reflexive deliberation. In this way, individuals are seen as active agents who mediate their subjective concerns and considerations (values, priorities, knowledge and capabilities) and their objective circumstances (for example, mandated regimes of curriculum, assessment standardisation and accountability) to act in certain ways.

Whilst teachers' powers and actions are conditioned by social structures, these structures are not considered by Archer to be 'forces', but rather are 'reasons for acting in particular ways' (Archer, 1995 p. 209). These actions can be transformative (morphogenetic), in that they transform the social structures or cultural systems within which they operate, or they can be reproductive (morphostatic) as they maintain structural and cultural forms. The 'morpho' word element in Archer's (1995) work acknowledges that 'society has no pre-set form or preferred state' (p.5); even though some ways of being become normalised, they are always shaped rather than pre-determined. Thus, teachers can make choices about what they prioritise in the teaching of writing, and can initiate change to current structures through the actions that they take.

### **Mediation as reflexive action**

To explicate the detail of teachers' mediation processes, we argue that mediation might be usefully conceptualised in terms of reflexive action. The courses of pedagogic action that teachers take in teaching writing are thus a result of their reflexive deliberations about their knowledge base, pedagogic know-how, and belief systems in relation to the complex interplay of contextual structures around the teaching of writing. Deliberation is concerned

with 'exploring the implications of endorsing a particular cluster of concerns from those pre-selected as desirable to the subject during the first moment' (Archer, 2007 p. 20). The first moment (discernment) occurs when internal dialogue compares and contrasts reflective, retrospective and prospective considerations. The reflexive cycle continues as the subject moves through the moment of dedication, not only deciding on worthwhile courses of action, but also whether or not s/he is capable of undertaking them and what priority they might have (Archer, 2007). In deliberating about worthwhile courses of action and capabilities for undertaking them, teachers can examine their subjective knowledges about writing and the teaching of writing. It is necessary therefore to expand our understandings of what constitutes teacher knowledge. In the next section we outline explications of teacher knowledge developed by Shulman (1986) and Koehler and Mishra (2008).

### **Teacher knowledge and pedagogic action**

In line with our argument to move away from reductionist views on teaching writing, it is important to understand the range of subjective knowledges and capabilities that individual teachers can draw upon when planning pedagogic action. Theories of teacher knowledge explain domains of interconnected teacher knowledge (content, pedagogical content, technological pedagogical content) necessary for effective teachers of writing. Shulman's (1986) influential work on teacher knowledge, along with more recent arguments from Koehler and Mishra (2008) about a technology-infused curriculum help to theorise the knowledge required to teach writing effectively. Three domains of teacher knowledge - *content, pedagogical content, and technological pedagogical content knowledge* - are used to describe the knowledge base for teaching writing in diverse classrooms. The first domain *content knowledge* (CK) relates to the knowledge of writing. The widely used *Four Resources Model* of literacy learning (Allan Luke & Freebody, 1999), which has informed English curriculum and pedagogy throughout Australian schools, outlines the key resources that a

person requires to be literate. We argue that this model provides a useful framework to theorise the domains of content knowledge required to teach writing, including: i) coding knowledge of text types with particular rhetorical, syntactic and lexical forms; ii) text participant knowledge of how to develop subject matter and vocabulary, and how to access students' prior knowledge and understandings of the world iii) text user knowledge of cognitive and composing processes that are used to plan, craft and edit texts with particular structures in order to fulfil certain communicative purposes for specific audiences; and iv) text analyst knowledge of writing as membership of a discourse community, with a particular 'voice' and identity.

The second domain, *pedagogical content knowledge* (PCK) relates to the most appropriate pedagogies for writing and how to cater for individual writers. PCK includes an understanding of the strategic use of a variety of approaches to teaching writing within a recognised pedagogic cycle (Harris, McKenzie, Fitzsimmons, & Turbill, 2003). The cycle involves a number of steps: (i) teaching subject content knowledge through directed inquiry; (ii) explicit teaching of text, paragraph and sentence structures; (iii) modelling and collaborative construction of written text types including the composing strategies of cognitive planning (Hayes, 2004), researching, drafting, revising, editing and publishing; (iv) facilitating creative self-expression through student choice of genre and media for different purposes; (v) responding to students' written texts with specific, action-oriented feedback (e.g. Christie & Dreyfus, 2007); and (vi) developing critical approaches to text and subject matter by examining particular representations of groups and ideas. Knowledge of individual learners' writing capacities and skills is necessary to inform these strategic pedagogic choices.

The third domain *technological pedagogical content knowledge* (TPCK) recognises the complexities of integrating new technologies into writing. TPCK not only includes an understanding of how to use particular platforms and software to generate digital and online text, but also how such technologies can change the forms, structures, writer/audience relationships and meaning potential of written text. Pedagogies related to this domain include: scaffolded exploration of new technologies; explicit teaching and modelling of the interplay between modes, for example, written/visual and written/oral; and modelling how knowledge can be constructed, co-constructed and linked in new ways using new technologies.

### **Rethinking the teaching of writing**

In this discussion of new ways of understanding the teaching of writing, we have endeavoured to conceptualise teachers' practices as the mediation of contextual conditions and individual agency and resources. Through the negotiation of the constraints and opportunities in structure and agency, the practice of teaching writing is shaped and reshaped. Teachers, as social agents, are understood as not totally free (Fairclough, 2003); rather their pedagogic actions can be seen as socially and institutionally constrained, albeit not entirely socially determined. Teachers' participation in particular social practices such as the teaching of writing to a class of linguistically-diverse Year 6 students involves the negotiation of powerful structural elements such as standardised curriculum and external assessment and the local conditions of the class. The structural imperatives are mediated by locally-oriented decisions related to students' needs and individual resources including subjective content, pedagogical and technological knowledges. Through mediation processes, practices are formed and reformed over time as the contextual conditions, both external (objective) and internal (subjective), shift and change (Archer, 1995). In this process, teacher planning, knowledges, decision-making and actions are reorganised and refined to

fit the changing contextual conditions. As such, the teaching of writing cannot be teased apart from its contextual, and therefore constitutive, conditions. Context becomes a necessary part of explaining the teaching of writing as it is currently practised. In the next section we outline key contextual conditions influencing the contemporary teaching of writing before moving to the presentation of our model.

### **Ongoing and Current conditions for teaching writing**

Currently in Australia, the teaching of writing is beset by converging and at times, contradictory priorities. The increased focus on standardisation in national curriculum and testing regimes sits uneasily beside the highly individualised needs of linguistically diverse students. The use of paper-based student responses on nationalised tests operates at odds with the emphasis on new communication technologies in the new Australian Curriculum. The relationship between writing, school instruction and language cannot be underestimated.

Teachers are at the forefront of implementing the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) that mandates standardised paper-based tests in literacy (reading, writing and language conventions) and numeracy for all Australian students in Years 3, 5, 7, and 9. Research from the UK, Europe and Australia on standardised testing has found that it generates superficial approaches to teaching writing where teachers ‘teach to the test’ (Grainger, Gooch, & Lambirth, 2005; Turvey, 2007) and students’ conceptual learning and creativity are stifled (Macken-Horarik, 2009; Sahlberg, 2010).

In Australia, the medium of instruction is Standard Australian English (SAE) which is also the foundation of the texts that are advocated, taught and assessed – the ‘genres of power’ (Luke, 1996) that constitute school-based education. School texts become increasingly

abstract, depersonalised and context-reduced as discipline-related knowledge becomes the focus. These texts and associated language forms constitute a type of elaborated code that may be unfamiliar to students from other language and cultural backgrounds. It has been argued that these texts need to be explicitly taught to prevent these students from being disadvantaged (Gibbons, 2002; Kettle, 2011). For second language learners, constructing appropriate and accurate texts requires vocabulary and grammatical competence, discourse organisational knowledge and cognitive processes, and sociolinguistic repertoires that are difficult to develop while simultaneously learning the language.

Research shows that second language learners develop conversational language quite quickly – between one and two years – but need between five and seven years to develop subject-specific school-based reading and writing competence to the same level as similarly-aged first language speakers (Gibbons, 2002). In 2010, 57% of Australia's 1.7% population increase was due to net overseas migration (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2010), thus in Australian classrooms, linguistic and cultural diversity is increasing. These demographic changes require teachers to negotiate the widening gap between school literacy requirements and students' individual language needs. The concern is that some classroom teachers are not prepared for teaching second language learners (Gibbons, 2002), particularly in writing. This concern is magnified as students move into upper primary and secondary school classes, with expectations to produce more linguistically-, rhetorically- and conceptually-complex texts to demonstrate understanding of a range of discipline-specific knowledge.

As noted above, our intention in this paper is to propose a model that synthesises the key elements operating in the teaching of writing. Central to this model is the understanding of the connection between contextual conditions and individual conditions of agency and decision-making, prominent in the work by Archer (2007). The understanding of this

relationship will go some way towards foregrounding the conditions and constraints that work complementarily to produce and be produced by the practice of teaching writing.

### **Teaching writing: A mediation of subjective considerations and contextual conditions**

The model we outline below (see Figure 1) illustrates the complexities around the writing pedagogies that are enacted in classrooms. The shaded section represents the sphere of contextual influences, encompassing both the external or objective (Archer, 2010) and the internal or subjective (Archer, 2010) considerations that shape pedagogic decision-making. The external or objective influences include standardisation and accountability agendas, community demographics and expectations, and students' individual learning needs, motivation and interests. These objective influences may change over time and through political priorities, so new external influences are added, or may move into the background to be replaced or overshadowed by more urgent agendas. The internal or subjective influences include teachers' knowledge base for the teaching of writing, their confidence in their capabilities, the extent to which they think they can (and/or want to) exercise agency, their motivation and passion for teaching and writing, and their propensity for sustainable change. The arrows that connect and circulate the model indicate our theorisation of context as shifting and changing as practices are formed and reformed through reflexive deliberation. We argue that teachers make professional decisions by *mediating* these objective and subjective concerns in different ways at different times. In this way, pedagogic action is seen as a precarious, deeply personal, yet socially constrained process, which may lead to change or may reproduce set forms.

**Insert Figure 1: Pedagogic mediation and reflexive action**



## Conclusion

This paper argues for a renewed focus on the teaching of writing from a social realist perspective, which accounts for the internal and external conditions that shape pedagogic action. Regulatory and standardised agendas can be imposed on teachers in the name of quality and/or as a way to instigate pedagogic change, but unless we understand the reflexive mediation processes that guide teachers' work, there is little prospect of satisfying and sustainable pedagogic practices for learners and teachers. Teaching demands significant personal investment, with personal and professional identities inescapably interconnected (Leitch, 2010), so it is crucial to recognise the interplay between objective and subjective conditions in the teaching of writing. We suggest that our conceptual model can guide research to provide a deep understanding of how and why teachers make their pedagogic decisions and the impact of these decisions on students' writing practices. These understandings can be used as the basis for targeted professional development as teachers deliberate about their own knowledge, capabilities and motivations. It can guide school literacy programs, as staff better understand how the needs and interests of their individual students, their teachers, and their community both shape and are shaped by broader agendas. It can lead to the development or wider sharing of new strategies for weaving 'test readiness' into deep and sustainable writing practices, and shaping standardised curricula guidelines to meet local and individual needs of both students and teachers. In conclusion, we posit reflexive mediation, which is constituted by contextual concerns, as the crux of new research into the teaching of writing.

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**Figure 1: Pedagogic mediation and reflexive action**

