

# Learning through collaborative writing

Gabrielle Cliff Hodges

## Abstract

This article looks again at the dynamics of reading, writing and telling stories. It argues that working collaboratively can motivate writers in ways which encourage them to redraft their work purposefully and explicitly in pursuit of particular creative effects. It exemplifies ways in which knowledge about language at word, sentence and whole text level can effectively be brought to bear as part of a holistic approach to writing.

## The dynamics of listening to, reading and retelling old stories

*Whenever I tell a traditional story I am part of a process, a new link in a chain of voices* (Lupton 2000)

When I first heard Kevin Crossley-Holland's story 'Sea Tongue' it was being read by the author himself at the launch of his collection *The Old Stories: Folk Tales from East Anglia and the Fen Country* (Crossley-Holland, 1997a). It is a version of a traditional tale of church bells ringing under the water to warn fishermen at sea away from quicksands and rocks. In this case, the bells are those of the church in Dunwich, the village on the Suffolk coast which has gradually, over the centuries, been falling into the sea as the cliffs are washed away beneath it.

Kevin Crossley-Holland's retelling of the story is particularly vigorous, activating a range of dynamic effects in the listener or reader. This is partly because the legend is presented as a fractured narrative, 'a kind of sound-story for different voices' (Ibid). The voices are those of the key elements in the tale: the bell, the bellwoman, the sea-god, the dead, the cliff, the living, the church, the boat, the night-storm, the morning, and the fisherman. The story is therefore told by a range of narrators, each announcing him- or herself in the first-person, forging a link towards the end of the section with the next narrator. Here is the opening for example:

*I am the bell. I'm the tongue of the bell. I was cast before your grandmother was a girl. Before your grandmother's grandmother. So long ago.*

*Listen now! I'm like to last. I'm gold and green, cast in bronze, I weigh two tons. Up here, in the belfry of this closed church, I'm surrounded by sounds. Mouthfuls of air. Words ring me.*

*High on this crumbling cliff, I can see the fields of spring and summer corn; they're green and gold, as I am.*

*I can see the shining water, silver and black, and the far fisherman on it. And look! Here comes the bellringer – the old bell woman.*

*I am the bellwoman. For as long as I live I'll ring this old bell for those who will listen . . .*

*I ring for the sailor and the fisherman. I warn them off the quicksands and away from the crumbling cliff. I ring and save them from the sea-god.*

*I am the sea-god . . . (Ibid)*

And so it continues, returning to the bell in the final section:

*I am the bell. I am the tongue of the bell, gold and green, far under the swinging water.*

*I ring and ring, in fog and storm, to save boats from the quicksands and the rocky shore. I'm like to last; I'm cast in bronze, I weigh two tons.*

*Listen now! Can you hear me. Can you hear the changes of the sea? (Ibid)*

Since first hearing this story I have re-read it many times. I have had a chance to analyse some of the ways in which its effects are created and how the dynamic between writer and reader or listener works. Reading and listening often *appear* to be passive and static (and are therefore erroneously *deemed* to be such). An audience, such as the one I formed part of when hearing this story at its launch, may *appear* to be passive and static, silent and unmoving. But, as storytellers (and teachers) know, there are different kinds of silence and stillness; beneath an apparently motionless surface all sorts of energies are being activated intellectually and physically.

Take, for example, the first two sentences of the story, *I am the bell. I'm the tongue of the bell*. Ten words only, but in order to animate them, the listener must adopt the critical position that is demanded by metaphor, in this case a particularly potent form of metaphor: personification. The listener has to *realise* the possibility that, through language, an inanimate object can have its own voice. Furthermore, the word 'tongue' in this context has a double meaning: as well as being the conventional term for the clapper of a bell, it signifies the bell speaking for itself. To appreciate all this, the listener must immediately be intellectually active, alert to what is coming next, namely a further invitation to engage with the narrative in a different way again, when the bell says: *I was cast before your grandmother was a girl. Before your grandmother's grandmother. So long ago*. Here the listener is set off on a

journey, chasing his or her ancestry back through time before being jolted into the present again with a sharp *Listen now!* As the bell looks out from the belfry across the gold and green landscapes of the changing seasons, the listener not only *hears* but *sees* as well: *And look! Here comes the bellringer.* By now, the intellect and the senses are fully in play.

None of this dynamism is visible or audible in the listener or the silent reader; nonetheless the inner ear and the mind's eye are hard at work as the story moves from the top of the belfry to the depths of the sea, between night and day, the living and the dead, the mortal and the mythical. Yet still that is not all. The story makes even more far-reaching demands, through its intertextual, social, cultural, historical, geographical resonances. *Listen now! Can you hear me? Can you hear the changes of the sea?* asks the bell at the end of the story. As we make connections with the language of bell-ringing, we are reminded of Shakespeare's sea-changes, full fathom five and perhaps of another East Anglian text, *Akenfield*, Ronald Blythe's portrait of an English village where a bell-ringer called Robert Palgrave explains the business of change-ringing and its addictive pleasures:

*'People who are not ringers...do not hear the tunes. I should say that ninety-nine percent of the people just hear "bells ringing". That is all... But when I hear the bells I think, my goodness, how beautiful! How wonderful! The combinations of sounds delight me.'* (Blythe, 1969)

Like Palgrave, the reader or listener who interacts fully with the words of 'Sea Tongue' hears the combinations of sounds creating meanings in a process equally clamorous and momentous.

Kevin Crossley-Holland has explained some of the reasons for his choice of retelling a traditional story in this way.

*[It] takes its lead from the conviction of the mediaeval theologian, Duns Scotus, that each element of our planet, each stick and stone and granule of earth, has its own quiddity, if only we have time to dream our way into it; and from the recognition by Native Americans that each element has its own voice, if only we listen to it.* (Crossley-Holland, 2000)

It enables storyteller and listener to adopt different perspectives in relation to everyday things in order to consider them afresh and thereby make new meanings. He concludes:

*Whether this form works or not, and whether it is imitable, is for others to say. But I offer it as one way in which form...can underpin matter.* (Ibid)

Experience of working with this story with a variety of groups suggests that the form is effective: the reader or listener is motivated by a range of dynamic

techniques such as shifts between narrative timescales – immediate present and distant past; by the interplay of first and second person requiring the reader to be both narrator and narratee simultaneously; by the activation of the senses, hearing and sight especially, which enable the construction of vivid moving images, film-making with the mind's eye and ear.

## Collaborative composition

*We tend to think of language which allows individuals to communicate with each other. The language and design of a mediaeval manuscript, however, is the product of many people. Hence, each text can be said to speak with several voices – those of the composer, the copyist(s), the illustrators and rubricators, the later editors and publishers, and sometimes readers who add marginal comments.* (Leith 1996)

When I first heard 'Sea-Tongue', I knew it was a story I wanted to share with the trainees I teach, partly because of its East Anglian content, themes and setting, partly because of its use of multiple voices. I was curious to see whether it was indeed imitable and I also sensed its potential as a stimulus for collaborative writing in the classroom. Reading the story and experimenting with the form is something I have subsequently done with several groups of secondary and middle school PGCE trainees who, in turn, have transformed the idea in their own classrooms. The results have led me to a number of further thoughts about processes of reading and writing which I will now outline as a contribution to current discussions about the teaching of literacy, writing in particular.

In the sessions on teaching writing I have firstly read 'Sea-Tongue' to the group. It is almost always new to them and often has immediate effects similar to those I have described above. Next I have read another very different East Anglian short story, this time the tale of the loss of King John's treasure in the fens in 1216 (Williamson, 1987). This is a story which is very well known, documented by the thirteenth century monk, Matthew Parris (Ashley, 1972) and often reproduced in East Anglian guidebooks or locally published collections of tales and historical stories. It concerns King John's final journey across the fens, in flight from his enemies and heading for Wisbech castle. He was advised to let his baggage-train containing his priceless jewels follow a short cut across the marsh to avoid it falling into the wrong hands whilst he and his nobles continued via the longer route. Local versions of the story suggest that the baggage-train and its guards were lured into the bogs by fenmen who were against the king. Cut off from dry land by the incoming tide, men and horses eventually drowned and the jewels sank without trace. John continued to Wisbech and thence to Swineshead Abbey where he became ill and shortly afterwards died. The treasure has never been found.

The story is brief and the telling by Lindsay Williamson atmospheric. It has plenty of potential for retelling, not least because of the continuing mystery of where exactly the treasure sank and why it has never been discovered. The next stage in the process is, as a group, to highlight the main elements of the story and then to find a way to breathe life into them again and give each one a new voice. A list of the main concrete, proper and abstract nouns, broadly in the order in which they occur in the story, is drawn up on the board and usually reads something like this: *King John, noblemen, crown, horse, marsh, treasure, fenmen, creek, baggage-train, tide, mist, treachery, silence*. Each element is allocated to one person who writes three sentences beginning 'I am ...' and finishes with a reference to the element which follows, for example:

*Writer 1: I am King John. I command, compel and covet. I ride in darkness with my noblemen.*

*Writer 2: We are the noblemen, loyal, honest and true. We follow the king to the ends of the earth. We worship the crown, resplendent and regal.*

*Writer 3: I am the crown...*

and so on. The group are given no further instructions but are told that their sentences will ultimately form part of a collective 'sound story' to be read aloud together and, to that end, they will need to consider the sounds of their pieces as part of the meaning of the story. Although this appears to be a relatively straightforward task, not least for trainee teachers of English, it is surprising to observe the almost universal anxiety with which it is greeted. One group monitored their progress in journal form, recording independently their thoughts and feelings about the task as they went along. They give reasons for their unease:

*Quite a challenging task – how can I write from the perspective of a crown? Also, keeping in mind that I need to link my passage to the king's horse...*

*Very difficult to do 'creative' writing and embarrassing to share it with the rest of a very talented group. Makes me aware of what we ask pupils to do.*

*This is a very painful experience – struggling to produce something in a short time which will be performed to the class. Worry about exposing my shortcomings.*

*Makes you realise what pupils feel when they are asked to do activities. Feel an immediate lack of confidence to write – feel a sense of pressure and panic to immediately imagine creative ideas.*

Words such as 'inadequate', 'worried', 'reluctant' occur over and over again. And just for three sentences!

However, some other important feelings are recorded as well:

*Once I get started and remember everyone is in the same boat [I] feel intrigued as to what other people will write and that is a motivation.*

*Feel a kind of responsibility to complete the task and do it well, since [it] must link with the person's before and after. Quite an unusual and interesting task; can have fun with it.*

*Made me think.*

One trainee captures something of the creative process very vividly:

*How am I going to write about treachery? Think treacherous thoughts, how does it make me feel? What images do I see? What is the essence of treachery?*

She is searching for that 'quiddity' mentioned by Crossley-Holland and thinking herself into the part. But, like the others, she finds it difficult. The group's collective resistance is evident, too, in the sighs and uneasy shifting in their chairs that accompany their attempts to write. Each time I have done the activity I have observed the same symptoms. The problem seems to be that although they have been given a 'model' and a topic for their writing and although they know its audience and purpose, there is no ignition to set in motion the composing process which attempts to synthesise ideas in the head with written words on paper. Scardemalia and Bereiter, in their detailed research into written composition, acknowledge the potential difficulties:

*It seems to us that the dialectical character of composition does not arise from any clear-cut dialogue-like process. Rather, it arises from the conflict between requirements of text and requirements of belief. In trying to resolve such conflicts, both the text and the writer's beliefs are subject to change. In the fortunate case, the change is in the nature of a synthesis, the hallmark of dialectic. (Scardemalia and Bereiter, 1985)*

They further contend that in order for development in writing to be achieved there must be not just an assembly of knowledge, but engagement in a dialectical process; that is, a debate between meaning and form which develops into some kind of synthesis.

As we have seen, the trainees' anxieties stem from a range of sources including low levels of self-confidence and self-esteem as writers and the challenges of the particular task. But they are also facing precisely the same conflict which Scardemalia and Bereiter outline, the conflict between what they want to communicate and how they are going to write it down. What, then, motivates them to confront the difficulties and attempt to solve the conflict?

Quite simply, the next move is for the group to read aloud what they have written, as a complete first

draft. This means they must be author *and* audience, contributing and listening to the first draft of the whole piece simultaneously. In my experience, without exception, a significant shift of attitude takes place at this point. Not only does the whole story transcend the sum of its parts, even in this early draft; in addition, the different contributions connect and react with one another in unpredictable ways, creating surprising (often pleasing effects). The result is that the dialectical process is ignited as the trainees appreciate critically what they have produced:

*surprisingly effective*

*actually really impressive*

*I was really amazed at some of the contributions*

*feel like your role is particularly important*

*it retold the story in an interesting and effective way*

*the format ensures the sections are linked even if personal styles vary.*

Of course, there are also criticisms, especially where there is disjunction or repetition. But these are not problematic: one effect of hearing the whole story is that it motivates the writers to *want* to redraft. The search for clarity, coherence and sound effect begins; but the responsibility has shifted from individual to collective. Crucially the dialectical process needs to be articulated. They are engaging in the compositional process out loud. But rather than the teacher 'modelling' as is often the practice in shared writing within the National Literacy Strategy, here they are doing the modelling for themselves, as creative participants rather than mere spectators.

There are other immediate reasons why motivation to redraft seems high. For example, if two writers have unwittingly used the same vocabulary they may want to negotiate alternatives in order to avoid repetition; if the writer representing the mist has referred to *my friend*, the *incoming tide* the writer representing the tide must consider this presumed relationship and adjust his or her piece accordingly; other writers may wish to change grammatical features such as pronouns or tenses to achieve cohesion. These amendments take place within the context of whole group work on the whole story which seems to increase the determination to persevere:

*Good to be part of a larger picture – forming [the] story between us...fun to see completion – team work.*

*Creating it as a whole group creates more motivation [and] makes you feel less self-conscious.*

*I would like to make my section more eloquent, imaginative etc.*

## Purposeful redrafting

*I am a scribbled form drawn with a pen  
Upon a parchment  
(Shakespeare *King John* V.vii.32-4)*

Taping the reading is one way in which to secure a record of the first draft. Often, incidentally, it helps to bond the different elements of the story and the group of writers. The first draft can also be word-processed so that in the next session the redrafting can be done collectively with the whole text available on a large monitor or electronic whiteboard. Redrafting the whole piece in this way allows for teacher intervention but, more importantly, sustains the group's attention to the writing process and engenders fruitful discussion. Any number of further issues may arise.

For example, in one group's version, the person writing the part of the fenmen produced her piece in verse, whereas the rest of the group wrote in poetic prose (following Crossley-Holland). Her immediate reaction was to volunteer to rewrite it in prose, but further discussion about why she had chosen verse in the first place yielded some interesting points directly related to meaning. Throughout the ages, fen people have accrued a reputation for being anti-authoritarian and subversive, not least in the seventeenth century when the draining of the fens threatened their livelihood and way of life. The term 'fen tigers' goes back at least to the time when fenmen crept up on and garrotted Dutch labourers brought in to dig the vast drains which stretched for miles across the Wash, destroying the rich wetlands and marshes on which they lived and supported themselves. The fenmen's chant thus seemed appropriate as a way of representing a group speaking with one voice, chanting in ways associated with collective endeavour, for example politics or sport. The verse was left as it was:

*We are the fenmen  
We rule this land  
We know the marshes  
Like the back of our hand.*

*We are the fenmen  
Stealthy and slow  
Saw the king's men sink  
Like melting snow*

*We are the fenmen  
On marsh and on plain  
Misled and abandoned  
The king's baggage-train.*

Another focus of attention at the drafting stage which seems to contribute to the high levels of motivation and collaboration is the investigation into word origins and their subliminal effect on meaning. In 'Different – But Oh How Like!' Kevin Crossley-Holland outlines what he sees as some of the

main responsibilities of the storyteller, especially the responsibility of trying to find the right words for the tale's culture, origin and audience. In relation to retelling the story of 'King John's Treasure' his ideas are thought-provoking:

*The language of folk tale, like the action of folk tale, is not complicated or fatty: it is simple and lean. This is because it derives from the oral tradition; because it deals in action always and seldom in feelings or ideas; and because it aims to speak to a wide, often unlearned and youthful audience. The words in our language that describe things, not ideas and feelings, very largely derive from Anglo-Saxon. Womb (wamb), man (mon), child, (cild), water (waeter), earth (eorthe), plough (plogh), root (rot) – the very fabric of life. The language of folk tale retold in English must surely come from this root too: words that are quick and lean and taut and true. Short words pack the greatest punch. (Crossley-Holland, 2000)*

It is interesting to review 'Sea Tongue' in the light of this comment and everywhere to find strong Anglo-Saxon echoes and reverberations, as in this passage with its wealth of kennings, assonance and alliteration:

*I am the sea-god. And I keep clapping my luminous hands.*

*Come this way, fishermen, over the seal's bath and here along the cockle-path. Here are the slick quicksands, and they will have you.*

*Fishermen, come this way over the gulls' road and the herring-haunt! Here, up against this crumbling cliff. Give me your boat. (Crossley-Holland, 1997a)*

With the story of 'King John's Treasure' there is another issue to be dealt with. We know that William the Conqueror was the first of a long line of French-speaking kings of England including King John (McCrum et al, 1986; Elmes, 2000). However,

*Though French had the social and cultural prestige, Latin remained the principal language of religion and learning. The English vernacular survived as the common speech. (McCrum et al, 1986)*

What implications, therefore, might there be for the retelling of *King John's Treasure* whose cast of characters includes French-speaking King John, noblemen who might have known French, Latin or English, guards and fenmen who presumably knew only English? Within the retelling of *King John's Treasure* it has proved illuminating to think about attributing vocabulary with French or Latin origins to King John and his nobles, whilst exploring Crossley-Holland's ideas about words of Anglo-Saxon origin with guards, fenmen, and other 'characters' in the story such as the creek, the marsh, the tide, the baggage-train. Using dictionaries which include word origins, another dimension can be added to the redrafting process. Sometimes it

leads in fruitful directions and alterations are made to the text. Other times, different organising principles – meaning, sound effect, coherence – prevail.

This may sound like a somewhat arid exercise, but a close look at any section of the story yields plenty of opportunity to discuss both form and meaning. For example, here is one trainee's second draft of her writing:

*I am the tide. You do not expect me, as slowly I creep, before I encircle those foolish enough to be in my path. Swirling, sweeping and surrounding, I crash, shattering the calm mist that has settled for the night.*

An analysis of the language here is like looking at a cross section of the fenland soil which tells archaeologists about its history. It offers a purpose for critical review of the writing. *Tide* and most of the words that serve to construct its character (*creep, path, sweeping, shattering, mist, settled, night*) all have Old English origins. However, *expect, encircle, surrounding* are Latinate words; do they serve to distance the tide from its part in the deed? *Swirling* turns out to be from Old Dutch, prefiguring unwittingly the influence of the Dutch on the later fen landscape as they carved their gargantuan drains through it. *Calm* is somewhat anachronistic since it has its origins in Greek which did not influence the English language until after the Renaissance. Should that therefore be changed in the next draft? Most fortuitous of all turns out to be the choice of the word *foolish* to characterise King John's guards and noblemen. It comes from Old French, tacitly emphasising the tide's attitude of disdain towards its victims and their social status.

On the whole, the trainees enjoyed the redrafting process. They found considering word origins interesting but not constraining. It offered a chance to 'get more involved with the words' whilst retaining a sense of the overall coherence of the story. Furthermore, as one of them pointed out, it involved them in yet another role in the compositional process:

*Redrafting is such a valuable exercise. It allows you to review your writing as a critic rather than the author.*

## Collaborative writing in school

*What the child can do in cooperation today he can do alone tomorrow (Vygotsky, 1986)*

Although the work I have described has been done in the context of University-based initial teacher training, it has been taken further in schools by the trainees themselves. Here, too, it seems, the approach has motivated students to write and redraft effectively and to take pleasure in the process. Students automatically work at word, sentence and

whole text level, engaged predominantly in an attempt to make joint meanings in which they can all delight. One trainee working on oral storytelling, introduced her Year 8 class to 'Sea Tongue'. They then worked on retelling the Beowulf story using a similar approach.

*The feeling of class ownership motivated the pupils and the use of a tape recorder appeared to make them feel their work was valued and important. (Rice, 1999)*

This trainee offers insight into why the particular form of storytelling seems to work so well:

*As soon as the pupil writes, for example, 'I am the door', there is personification involved. That personification is a direct result of the fact that inanimate objects do not speak. There is thus a subtle and intricate link with oracy, which is further enhanced when the [story] is read aloud. When the pupil reads aloud 'I am the door', the process of linking a door and a human is embodied in the task and the link is made clearer to the pupil. This is an important way in which oracy can help to develop an understanding of personification, and of how personification can be used in distinctive ways within the oral tradition. (Ibid)*

Her analysis reiterates the importance of recognising and activating the kinaesthetic and the aural not just the verbal components of literacy, as Kevin Crossley-Holland does in 'Sea Tongue', treating them holistically, not as discrete and unrelated.

## Developing writing

*Look at the sun's fierce lances, the dance of light on stone: word and spirit have reached an agreement. (Crossley-Holland, 1997b)*

There are two points which I am interested to explore further in relation to the generally positive experiences of writing which I have described above. The first is to do with motivation and the second is to do with collaborative writing. Pat D'Arcy has recently reminded us that 'the fact that writing enables us to set down our thoughts and feelings should be deeply motivating' (D'Arcy, 2000) but if we focus too much on 'surface features and fail to take the meanings which have been created seriously, [it] will do nothing to encourage young writers to make their thinking visible and, indeed, may actively discourage it' (Ibid). There is a real danger that emphasis on modelling can lead students to mimic rather than create. Furthermore, the ever-increasing pressure to assess students' writing through formal tests inevitably privileges individual work over collaborative endeavour. Teachers, of course, are always trying to foster greater self-confidence and self-esteem in students so that they are more prepared to venture on written tasks independently. But research into motivation (Bruner, 1966)

and the writing process (Scardemalia and Bereiter, 1985) suggests that the development of autonomy nevertheless depends upon working collaboratively with teachers or peers. In *Towards a Theory of Instruction* Bruner writes

*I would like to suggest that what the teacher must be... is a day-to-day working model with whom to interact. It is not so much that the teacher provides a model to imitate. Rather, it is that the teacher can become a part of the student's internal dialogue – somebody who respects what he wants, someone whose standards he wishes to make his own (Bruner, 1966)*

It is instructive to note Bruner dissociating the word 'modelling' from imitation. Instead he links it with interactivity and dialogue and, later on, with what he calls 'reciprocity'. Reciprocity involves 'a deep human need to respond to others and to operate jointly with them towards an objective' (my italics) (Ibid). The work on 'King John's Treasure' seems to exemplify this reciprocity, the trainees' dialogue with each other and with Crossley-Holland's work illuminating the normally shadowy meaning-making process. Furthermore, because the participants in the activity are not working in isolation they feel less exposed and better able to concentrate on the dialectical processes of composition. The tension between the initial thoughts in their heads about what they want to write individually and how the whole story will eventually work is similar to the tension which arises as a result of the solitary writer's endeavour to arrive at a synthesis between internal thought and external print on the page; the difference is that they can discuss possible solutions with each other, rather than having to wrestle with them alone.

*Writing can be intellectually very demanding, requiring attention to both rhetorical and substantive issues... it is the tension between these two kinds of problems that leads to the deepening of reflective thought through writing. (Scardemalia and Bereiter, 1985)*

In collaborative writing the tension must be resolved explicitly so that there is not only a deepening of reflective thought through writing but, at best, a deepening of reflective thought about writing as well. Collaboration may therefore have a more important part to play in the development of sustained, independent writing than some policy-makers of late seem to have recognised.

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### CONTACT THE AUTHOR:

Gabrielle Cliff Hodges, University of Cambridge,  
Faculty of Education, Hills Road Site (Homerton  
College), Cambridge CB2 2PH.

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