

WordWorks Teacher Courses:

*A chance to reinvestigate the **written word** and **teaching practice***

WordWorks Teacher Courses help teachers learn how to gain control over the underlying principles of written word structure and how to use this knowledge to guide classroom literacy instruction. At another level, our courses are opportunities to examine teaching practice. I tried to describe my interest in this other level in an eMail to Melvyn Ramsden, which he quoted in a recent podcast:

“As much as I am fascinated by the orthography system, my heart has always been more in the instruction that orthography encourages. I’m convinced that my work with real spelling has refined my understanding of teaching, and desire to understand teaching better as much as anything else it’s done for me.”

Growing from this motivation, our Teacher Courses not only reveal the structure of the written word for teachers, but they also build on that experience by planting seeds to guide on-going investigations of educational practice and philosophy.

I was recently asked if I could run 5 day in-service for teachers at an international school. In describing what I might do with this opportunity, I tried to explain these two distinct, but interrelated goals – clarifying how the writing system works, and facilitating on-going development of teaching practice.

Below I am sharing an edited version of this letter as an attempt to articulate a wider view of what WordWorks Teacher Courses are about...

Let me describe what are essentially two levels of professional development I have in mind when I work with teachers on instruction of the written word. The first level is the obvious one: to help teachers gain confidence in how to prepare students with the basic orthographic knowledge they deserve to have at their disposal as they learn how to engage with the written word. Part of that job includes helping teachers learn how exploit the information offered by Real Spelling, WordWorks and various other resources. There is a second, less obvious focus of my work with teachers that deserves clarification.

My own experience as a teacher, and my experience introducing teachers to Real Spelling has convinced me that *the process of reframing understanding of how the writing system works, and how it can be taught, provides an opportunity for deep generative pedagogical renewal in a school community.* Let me take a moment to expand on that.

Teachers need and deserve support with gaining mastery of orthographic facts, and confidence in their ability to organize and present those facts effectively to students. Providing effective support for this goal is the basic, and crucial purpose of my work with educators. The substantial reframing of what the English spelling system is and how it works that comes with this first goal can’t help but bring along other effects in its wake.

When teachers (like myself) first run into Real Spelling, it usually doesn't take long before they think, "I wish it didn't have a name that makes it sound like it's about spelling - it's so much more

about reading and vocabulary development." I was of that opinion for quite some time. The more I used this content as a context for teaching children, the more I came to believe that not only is spelling too small a term, but reading and vocabulary are too small as well.

Fundamentally, when successfully taught, this instruction is about helping students learn how to think clearly, critically, and creatively.

When I arrived at this view, the statement "*spelling is human thought made visible*" made me shake my head as I realized Real Spelling just might be the appropriate title – it just takes time and work to see why.

"*We are talking about teaching the spelling system, not the spelling of words,*" is a phrase I use a fair bit in my courses. The words that I end up using to teach how the writing system works are never the point - they are simply the necessary raw material. Since words hold the patterns of meaning that my instruction targets, words are obviously needed to teach those patterns. I have found some words to be particularly useful for teaching particular patterns. For teachers I've found the juxtaposition of <hopping> and <hoping> effectively illuminates how understanding suffixing patterns and word structure can help the reader get to the meaning of a word. I've found that if I present these two words on a board for a class of young students, and tell them that there is a way they can know for sure which of these has to be about what rabbits do, I quickly get their attention focused on word structure. Another teacher might be as effective by using <taping> and <tapping> or <cuter> and <cutter> for these same purposes. The goal of my work with teachers isn't to give them an assignment to teach children the structure of <hoping> and <hopping>, but to help them learn know what the fundamental conventions of English spelling are, how they work, and to help them with the confidence and strategies to find their own ways of *stirring* their students' intellectual curiosity with well chosen words. (By the way, note that word is not spelled <*stiring>!)

I don't know if you have ever run into the writing of Alfred North Whitehead. He provided a wonderful description of this point when he wrote, "*The problem of education is to make the pupil see the wood by means of the trees.*" I work with teachers so that they can help students understand the meaningful structure of the spelling system – by means of the spelling of words. In an analogous way, I am beginning to see that introducing educators to the writing system often encourages a reinvestigation of their thinking about teaching. If words are the raw materials for teaching the patterns that govern their meaning, perhaps learning to teach these patterns can be an effective raw material for thinking about generative patterns of instruction.

On one level, working with teachers on this content is a way of reemphasizing the difference between presenting "inert ideas" (Whitehead again) as opposed to introducing generative ways of knowing. I spent 10 years teaching an inert understanding of the writing *system*. Discovering that there is a clear structure and meaning to be investigated and understood -- in something we have been taught to assume is a frustrating, irregular system that kids need to memorize -- has the potential to ignite teachers to reexamine and question their practice. Unveiling the writing system as a coherent, well-ordered system provides teachers with powerful evidence that something as basic to education as the writing system has been misrepresented. Further, that misrepresentation encouraged rote practice over higher level critical thinking and problem-solving experiences. This experience can be a wake up call for teachers to reconsider other areas of their teaching where they might be able to find pattern and meaning to exploit instead of rote.

In my first year of teaching Real Spelling, I was also teaching how to reduce fractions to lowest terms. We recognized that the series of choices that needed to be made to recognize whether the simplest form of a fraction had been reached seemed similar to the steps in a flow chart for suffixing changes. We started investigating some of the questions we always asked ourselves first when reducing fractions, and started to put them in an order of priority. For example, if the numerator fits in the denominator, you're done. If it doesn't, it might be wise to see if both the numerator and denominator are even numbers. I challenged my grade 4's to see if they could come up with a flow chart for reducing fractions, and told them if they succeeded they could use it on the next quiz. We succeeded. The irony, of course, is that by the time they finished organizing their understanding of the process of reducing fractions around building the flow chart, they didn't need the chart much any more! I had found a way to have them learn a process rather than ask them to memorize it.

Besides teaching how the writing system works, WordWorks Teacher Courses model strategies for instruction built on a model of structured inquiry, which are relevant to all content areas. Current curricula all over the world -- from the PYP that is common in international schools to the Balanced Literacy Curriculum in Ontario -- regularly encourage exactly these kinds of learning experiences for children. All students deserve word study instruction that is rich with structured inquiry that makes sense of how the system really works. Why shouldn't all students have instruction that gives them the potential to deepen their understanding in a science class by knowing how to ask a question like, "What's the word sum for <condensation>?" However, this instruction can only happen if we first provide teachers with training and resources showing how the English written word works. You can't problem-solve an irregular system.

Our workshops don't start by talking about questions of underlying educational philosophy. We just start working with the writing system and modelling ways that it can be taught. The underlying teaching philosophy of presenting children with generative knowledge in a way that engages their intellectual curiosity is best addressed during, and after going through that same process with teachers. Some teachers will treat this as PD that gives them a few helpful lesson ideas. Some will take the experience as the beginning of a generative reinvigoration of their practice.

I have seen the introduction of Real Spelling spark powerful cultures of learning in many groups of teachers and students as they start to learn with and from each other. This is a benefit that comes on the back of discovering the structure and meaning of the writing system. I target both the word and instruction in my work with teachers.

Yet another Whitehead quote clarifies the dual focus of WordWorks courses and workshops, "*Education is the acquisition of the art of the utilisation of knowledge.*" This is as true for learners whether they happen to be in the role of student or teacher.

Peter Bowers

May 13, 07

www.wordworkskingston.com

Contact us at wordworkskingston@gmail.com if you are interested in learning more specifics about our workshops and courses.