

An introduction to *i*-writing

We can now say that *i*-writing is a low-risk activity used to discover, gather and sort ideas. When teachers set *i*-writing, they will normally ask pupils to write a certain number of ideas or for a given length of time. Ideas gain meaning when placed in a web of connections with other ideas. This placing is achieved using concepts. The most important of those are:

cause/effect/consequence
question/answer/statement
same/different/similar/opposite/alternative/addition
all/some/none/many
always/sometimes/never
group/kind/category/is/example/part-whole
opinion/claim/reason/evidence
before/after/at the same time/then
certain/possible/probable/impossible/if-then
important/significant

I prefer to call them concepts or even conceptual frameworks rather than keywords or 'thinking vocabulary' because the concepts can be expressed in many different ways. For example, when a child says: 'I've got another idea,' she might mean, that she's got an *alternative*, *different* idea or that she's got a similar idea she wants to add to someone else's.

I wouldn't necessarily want to make the child use a different expression but I do want her (and other pupils) to be able to recognise whether or not she has got an alternative idea and to know what follows from that. Any alternative may then need to be assessed and the assessment will often involve thinking about possible consequences, should the alternative be applied. This raises two important points:

1. Organising concepts can be used as a vocabulary for direct expression – we can use words such *alternative*, *cause* and *kind* to express essential connections as in:
 - Smoking *causes* cancer.
 - An *alternative cause* of some cancers can be found in a person's genetic make-up.
 - Cancer is a *kind* of disease. (or 'Cancer *is* a disease.')
2. They also serve as useful terms in a metacognitive vocabulary. They allow us to clarify other expressions and appreciate the nature of work they might doing in a dialogue or a piece of writing. If a pupil says: 'I've got another idea ..' we can ask 'is that an *alternative* idea?' If a pupil writes 'another idea is ...' she can ask herself 'is that an *alternative* idea?' If a pupil says: 'I think friends should be loyal,' we ask 'do you mean *always* loyal?' If a pupil writes: 'I think friends should be loyal,' she can ask herself, 'do I mean *always* loyal?'

The concepts are effective metacognitive tools because they help us to identify, by using of a single word, the nature and implications of a relationship almost simultaneously with the expression of it.

Organising concepts and *i*-writing

i-writing often starts from an organising concept. For example, you could ask pupils to do some of the following *i*-writing tasks:

1. Write (as a list of 'because' clauses) at least 3 reasons to support or oppose an opinion raised in discussion. (Starting concepts: *opinion, reason*)
2. Write a list of examples of the particular concept under scrutiny in a discussion. (Starting concept: *example*)
3. In five lines, describe what might be the cause of something you have been discussing. (Starting concepts: *cause, effect*)
4. In ten minutes, summarise the three most important ideas raised in a discussion (Starting concepts: *important*)

On the other hand, pupils could do some free writing and then use organising concepts to find meaning in the resulting text. You could say: Take five minutes write to down your first thoughts about the question we are going to discuss. Then start the discussion by saying: 'Did any ideas come out of the writing that you think are important to you and that could start the discussion off.' Or you might have a few pupils read what they have written and ask: 'So what are some of the similarities and differences here.? Do they give us a starting point?'

In dialogue, one concept leads to others

The best environment for *i*-writing is one that is dialogical. When *i*-writing comes out of dialogue (as in the examples above) and flows back into dialogue, pupils will quickly realise that concepts rely on each other to do their work of helping us to make meaning.¹

For example, I was talking to a group of six-year-olds recently. I said I had brought a book to read with them called 'The Important Book',² and I asked them to write down three ideas about what important things the book might contain. Here is a sample of responses:

1. Pages
2. Precious things
3. Fairies
4. Pushing
5. Beliefs
6. Tigers
7. Animals
8. Birthdays

After writing, the children read out some of their items and I wrote them on A4 paper and laid them on the floor. The items were interesting but I wanted to get to a deeper level of meaning by getting the pupils to place them in a web of other concepts. Here are snippets of the kinds of dialogues that followed:

PRECIOUS THINGS (2)

ME: Precious things. That's interesting. What is an example of a precious thing?

GIRL: Precious jewels.

ME: Ah ... precious jewels. That's interesting. Any others?

BOY: Precious coins.

ME: Is precious the same as saying something is worth a lot of money?

GIRL: No ... memories can be precious.

PUSHING (4)

ME: Pushing ... Jane ... Why is pushing important? What's your reason for writing that?

JANE: You might hurt someone.

ME: Do you mean, if you push them you might hurt them?

JANE: Yes.

ME: So things might be important if they have good or bad consequences ... if you do something and then something bad happens or something good happens because of it. (Some nodding).

Can anyone think of things people might do that would have good consequences ... good things would happen.

BOY: Being kind.

GIRL: Helping someone.

ME: (to Jane) Jane ... what do you think ... is being kind as important as pushing.

JANE: No.

Jane wasn't convinced but we can see that, in a dialogical situation, the starting list (based on the concept *important*) gathers meaning when placed in a web of other concepts such as *example*, *reason*, *cause*, *consequence*, and *then*. This was the first time I had talked with this class so I was giving a lot of support. Over time, I would encourage pupils to ask each other the kinds of questions I was asking as they come to understand that questions of this sort will help them to develop meaning together. When they write for ideas plus expression, they will have to ask these kinds of questions of themselves in order to revise their writing so that readers can understand its significance. So we can see that it is important that *i*-writing takes place in a dialogical context.

A collection of *i*-writing tasks

The next chapter is a collection of suggestions for *i*-writing tasks. I will assume that they will be set in a dialogical context and I will give some suggestions, where appropriate, as to how the writing could be lead into further dialogue. I will also indicate potential links with transition lessons (shared writing that develops short samples of *i*-writing into *ie*-writing) and *ie*-writing (grammatically elaborated writing, produced with the understanding and enjoyment of readers in mind).

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Lev Vygotsky makes a similar point very strikingly: 'Concepts do not lie in a child's mind like peas in a pod, without any bonds between them. If that were the case, no intellectual operation requiring coordination would be possible, nor would any general conception of the world. Not even separate concepts could exist; their very nature presupposes a system ... If every concept is a generalisation, then the relation between concepts is a relation of generality ... one must turn from a study of concepts as isolated entities to a study of the 'fabric' made of concepts. See: Lev Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (revised edition), 1986, The MIT Press
- ² Margaret Wise Brown and Leonard Weisgard, *The Important Book*, 1977 Harper Collins