THE HAUNTED HOUSE:

TEACHING CREATIVE WRITING THROUGH COLLABORATIVE LEARNING TO 9-13 YEAR OLDS

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Many teachers of creative writing find teaching the 9-13-year-old age group tricky for a few reasons. These children are usually in a time of radical transition: getting ready to move into a new school, or starting in a new one. They are still, in my experience as a teacher and parent, children who want to be grown up but aren't ready for the fully adult material you can teach 14-16 year olds, and yet don't want 'baby' stuff. This makes teaching them difficult. What exactly should you teach? How should you teach it?

Having had decades at the chalk face and a few years as a teacher-educator, I feel I might have discovered an answer. I've found that using the well-worn trope of the haunted house works a treat – it's never failed me yet. Why is this? Well, the reasons are quite complex, but in brief, I've always found that children of this age are not only very familiar with the ghost-story genre but also extremely keen to share their stories with each other.

KEY THEORY

The following series of learning activities draw upon my enthusiasm to help students discuss, imagine and write both collaboratively and individually.

At the heart of this approach is the idea that children create their own 'simulation' of a haunted house: they pretend together that certain characters – a bully, a coward and vain, selfish, jealous people – explore a creepy domain, full of spooky sounds, smells, tastes, textures and sights. Each of the characters are taught a lesson.

This unit of work is underpinned by some serious learning theories. Perhaps most significantly, it is informed by the idea that learning is 'is building knowledge as part of doing things with others' (Watkins 2011, p. 11; Gilbert 2017), or what educational theorists call 'social constructivism'. The focus is upon children learning how to write through collaborative discussion: talking about shaping plans, maps, ideas, descriptions, characterisations and narratives in groups, and coming to a consensus about what might be the most effective way of constructing an imaginative world. Watkins writes:

> As people are engaged together, they are also empowered – both to contribute and to influence. This view helps us see that the settings and situations which provide the most potential for learning are those in which participants are engaged in real action that has consequences not only for them but for their community as a whole. (2011, p. 12)

The students are also drawing upon their own funds of knowledge (González et al. 2005). Carlos G. Vélez-Ibáñez and James B. Greenberg (1992) describe this concept as:

> those historically accumulated strategies (skills, abilities, ideas, practices) or bodies of knowledge that are essential to a household's functioning and well-being (p. 91-92)

In my experience, ghost and horror narratives play a significant role in all children's lives; these are frequently the stories that children tell each other at home, in the playground, on holiday; these are the types of films, TV shows, computer games etc that they find thrilling. I've always learnt a great deal about my students by simply asking them to recount ghost stories they've heard, read about or watched: every child has a different story to tell.

The skill that is required by the teacher in this project is to steer children away from clichés or to get them to make the clichés – the picture with eyes that move, the ticking of the clock, the creak of the door etc – live afresh. The collaborative nature of this project makes it easier for the teacher to intervene when things are going wrong. The teacher can take part in group discussions and plans, and get children to use an unfamiliar object, picture, poem, literary extract/story etc as inspiration to write something that is original and imaginative.

The haunted house simulation is multi-modal in that it uses many different modes – drama, embodied learning, group work, pictures, photographs, drawings, objects, movie clips – to inspire the construction of the haunted house. Kress (2005) explains the multi-modal method in this way:

> A multimodal approach is one where attention is given to all the culturally shaped resources that are available for making meaning: image, for instance, gesture, or the layout – whether of the wall-display, or the furniture of classrooms and of course writing and speech as talk. Mode is the name we give to these culturally shaped resources for making meaning. Multi refers to the fact that modes never occur by themselves, but always with others in ensembles. Multimodality characterized therefore by the presence and use of a multiplicity of modes. (p. 2)

The different modes are used to build a sense of context: the children piece together a picture of a haunted house in fine granular detail, drawing upon their funds of knowledge to make it uniquely spooky. The unit makes great use of audio and sensory detail. I've found the most successful part of this story is when pupils shut their eyes or are blindfolded and the other group members take them on a 'sensory journey' where they experience smells, tastes, sound effects, words that describe the room, and textures that they feel in their hands in the form of objects (things like slime work well). Many of my pupils have told me that they've found this an absolutely thrilling experience. Obviously, it requires a high level of good behaviour, but I've noticed that even so-called 'badly behaved' classes will behave well for this project because they are intrinsically motivated to do it.

Built into this unit is the notion of re-drafting. I have found it is particularly successful in this regard because it does not require children to individually make a piece of writing 'better', something many children (and grown-ups) find extremely difficult, but asks them to take an existing narrative – a certain character encountering a haunted room – and improve it by getting everyone to work out how this character might be taught a lesson. The teacher can intervene at this point because they can say that this is what writers do: they try to make much of their writing 'character-based' and ensure that the action is shaped by their character's unique personality. When I've taught this unit, I've drawn upon Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* to illustrate this: the haunting of Scrooge is inextricably linked to his mean, miserly character. The students can learn about some important concepts outlined by Aristotle in his *Poetics* (Tierno, 2002) such 'hubris': the bullying, vain and selfish people often find that their pride is significantly deflated in the haunted house, and all of the characters, except for the coward, experience some kind of 'nemesis' or retribution. The coward often exhibits 'hamartia', namely he/she has the 'tragic flaw' of their cowardice; and all of the characters undergo moments of 'peripeteia' or reversals of fortune, with many of them experiencing 'anagnorisis' or moments of realisation where they perceive their flaws and resolve to change them.

Since many of the students are working in groups at a reasonably leisurely pace and often re-drafting work, there is plenty of opportunity for the teacher to intervene if they see a 'good teaching opportunity'. In this sense, the pedagogy developed by the Grammar for Writing project is useful; the teacher can say, at suitable moments, whether words need to be changed and improved, or sentences and paragraphs re-structured. Furthermore, the teacher can encourage students to do this in groups using the guidelines set out on the excellent Grammar for Writing website (University of Exeter, 2020).

Another pedagogical approach could be to write alongside the students, where appropriate. So, for example, the teacher could join groups for certain writing tasks and/or discussions, or write their own haunted house description and share their thoughts and feelings about their progress as they do so. Research shows that teachers better understand what the real issues are regarding writing when they write alongside their pupils (Cremin 2006, 2017: Wrigley & Smith 2012: National Writing Project, 2020).

The project also involves students taking notes, summarising and using visuals to capture their thoughts. Marzano et al. (2001) have shown that explicit teaching of these strategies can really improve levels of achievement in all subjects. This unit has enough flexibility in it for teachers to do just this in an organic way. They could use pupils' note-taking, visual organisers and pictures as examples and models, or share some of their own.

THE RESEARCH & CREATIVE WRITING EXERCISES IN ACTION

First, the teacher of this unit needs to explain the what, why and how of the simulation. In brief you might say:

- What? Students are going to sit in groups of five and map out, draw, discuss, plan and write descriptions/stories about an allocated area of a haunted house.
- Why? This is a simulation: you are going to plan for a 'make-believe' recreation of a haunted house. You're doing it to develop your powers of imagination, your descriptive writing skills and to enjoy working and writing together.
- How? You'll be working first as individuals and then in groups, and writing both collaboratively and individually, as well as making your own group haunted house podcast.

INTRODUCTION FOR STUDENTS: USING VISUALS

The first activity is individual, with the teacher giving students some visual stimuli, video clips and literary extracts to get their imaginations racing. I used the following pictures, but you can use whatever you feel works for you.

Figure 1 Walking in the misty sunset to the haunted house

Figure 2 The dining room, first floor

Figure 3 A bedroom

Working with photographs or pictures is usually very popular with children. With each of the pictures, the teacher asks them to discuss and write notes on the five senses in these situations. With Figure 1, I asked the students to work in pairs and 'hot-seat' this person (my son) walking through the mist towards the haunted house in a strange sunset. Hot-seating consists of one participant being in role – pretending to be the person walking to the house – and the other participant asking questions, which get the person in the hot-seat to consider what the walker in the mist might hear, see, touch, taste, smell etc and also talk about why he is heading towards the house.

With Figure 2, the person in the hot-seat considers what happened when they were invited to eat a scone and drink tea at this table (you could even provide some real food here). Key questions to ask the person in role would be: who has invited you to eat at this table? What do you talk about? Why have you come to this house? What do you want?

With Figure 3, using hot-seating and/or paired discussion, they think and discuss why they are going to sleep in this bed, and what they think, feel and sense.

However, you don't need to use photographs or hot-seating, because what you want to do at this stage is give the students a 'taster' for haunted house scenarios. Trailers or video clips of haunted house films always engage students. For example, the trailer for *The Woman in Black* (2012) is always a winner, even if the students have seen it before. You can pause the trailer at the part where Daniel Radcliffe opens the door to the haunted house, and then get everyone to jot down the sounds, smells, textures, sights and tastes of that particular moment. You could then discuss the ways in which the trailer follows the conventions of the ghost story, but also offers some surprises. This can then lead onto a discussion about how the genre works: it has very well-known conventions but the successful stories always add their own special 'take' on the tropes. For example, *The Woman in Black* uses the rocking chair in creepily unexpected ways.

You could use some ghost stories or poems to whet their appetites. Longfellow's poem, 'Haunted Houses', is old fashioned but effective in this regard, while Michael Donaghy's 'Haunts' is very short, poignant and creepy too. These poems can be read and enjoyed, with pupils underlining what they find engaging, and then discussing in pairs or groups why they find them creepy – or not as the case may be. The point is that you have a discussion about the topic, using the poems as a springboard for the conversation.

The overall point of this part of the lesson is just to give students an introduction to the topic, a taster so that they are ready to move on to the next part…

STEP 1: CREATING A SCENARIO

Once they've been given this introduction, the students are now ready to work more fully in their groups, devising their own haunted houses. They can use some of the ideas they gained from the whole-class exercises discussed above, or they can make up an entirely different haunted house.

The teacher then needs to divide up the class into different coloured groups of five: blue, yellow, green and red. Each group is allocated an area of the haunted house and its surroundings. These are the ones I used:

1. Blue: ground floor, dining room and cellars
2. Yellow: first floor, library, master bedroom
3. Green: second floor, children's bedrooms, attic
4. Red: gardens, grounds, surrounding area

First, as a group, they will need to discuss what this section of the house contains in terms of furniture, food, decorations, walls, windows, musical instruments etc, and also who actually used to live here. They will need to determine why the house is haunted in this section of the house. Everyone should draw their own impressions and map of the house, labelling and annotating it as appropriate. Give them 10-20 minutes to do this. Don't let them linger too long, but equally if they are working productively, do allow them more time. Then ask for a report back, and gauge as best you can how well each group is doing. If you think they need a bit more input; in a gentle way, invite some constructive criticism and suggest some fresh ideas.

STEP 2: SENSUAL WRITING AND PLANNING

Next, each person in the group has a sense to exclusively work upon. They need to list, draw and then write a few sentences about their sense and their allocated section of the haunted house. This is how I divvy it up:

- Person 1: Sounds (the wind, clocks ticking, the scraping of fingernails at the window)
- Person 2: Smells (damp mist, mystical incense)
- Person 3: Sights (get the students to consider the lighting, candles, shadows, small objects)
- Person 4: Tastes (what do certain ghosts taste like if they enter your mouth?)
- Person 5: Textures (the tread of the floor underfoot, the slimy walls, the smooth wallpaper)
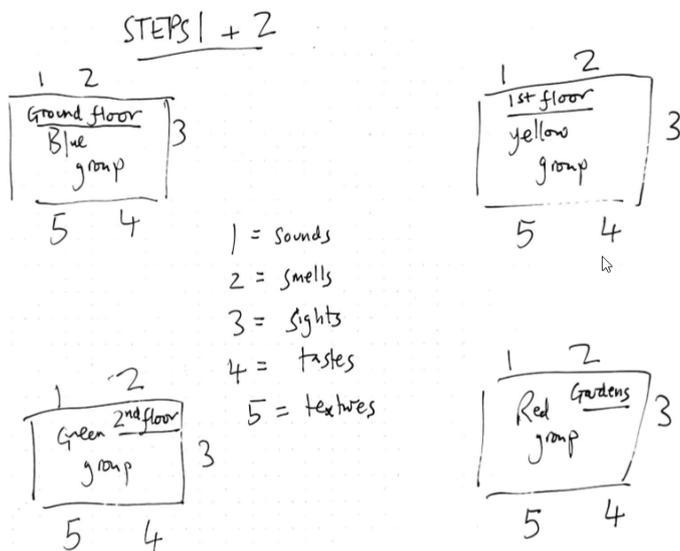

Figure 4 My rough teacher's plan of steps 1 and 2. You can draw your own.

Figure 4 shows that everyone on the tables has been given a number from 1-5, and each group has a colour. Each numbered person has a sense to consider and make notes upon, thinking about the sense in relation to the haunted house.

Now each group is asked to jointly plan out and then individually write about different people who enter the house. These are the characters I use because they chime with many of the concerns of this age group:

- Person 1: A bully
- Person 2: A coward
- Person 3: A jealous person
- Person 4: A vain person
- Person 5: A selfish person

The students need to draw a big outline of this person, writing inside the body of the outline what this person thinks and feels about him/herself, and then outside them what other people – parents, friends, teachers etc – think/feel about them. They consider these questions: what does this character want? Why have they entered the house? What will they learn from being haunted? Here, or previously if appropriate, the teacher can explain the two major scenarios for ghost stories:

- Ghosts who get their revenge (the driving force behind *The Woman in Black*)
- Ghosts who teach the living a lesson and are often benign (the thematic heart of *A Christmas Carol*)

The groups should report back to the whole class after this phase of planning has happened. When I've worked on this project in two-hour lessons, the lesson will have finished by now, so you might want to set the completion of this for homework.
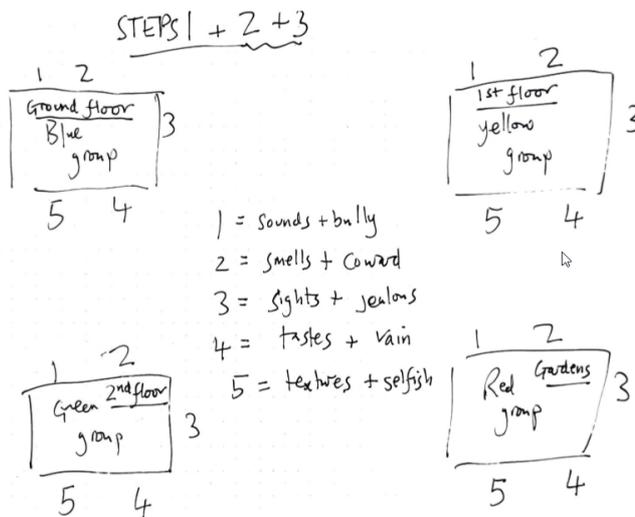

Figure 5 Teacher's rough plan of steps 1, 2, 3

STEP 4: THE QUEST

The next step is to give the groups some preparation time for the next major activity. The idea is that after 20 minutes' preparation, certain characters will sit down with another group, and that group will take them on a sensory journey that enables them to experience that group's part of the house: giving them possibly something to eat (obviously something edible), creating a soundscape, possibly a smell scape, getting them to feel objects and textures. The characters should ideally be blindfolded or shut their eyes when they sit down to go on their quests. The characters should also then share their unique stories, explaining why and how they are bullies, cowards, jealous, selfish and vain etc.

Most groups will have one person visiting them, but one group will have two people visiting them using the group size I've suggested (see Figure 6). This usually isn't a problem and can be very helpful

if you have noticed that there is a group which is struggling: send two characters to see them so that they gain some more ideas.
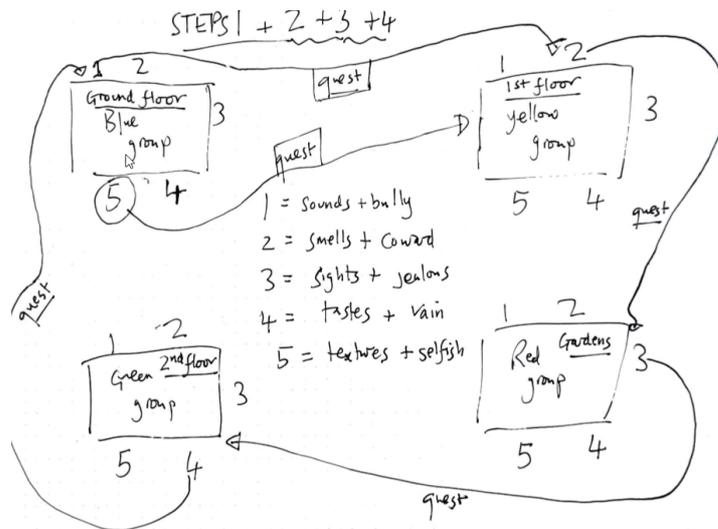

Figure 6 Step 4: The quest, sending an envoy to another table

Figure 6 shows what happens when an envoy, one person from each group, is sent to another table to experience that group's haunted house. The envoys go on a quest around the room, absorbing the different simulations, and then report back to their original group.

STEP 5: REFINING THE NARRATIVE, DEVELOPING CHARACTER AND STRUCTURE

Once the groups have shared their sensory journeys and the characters' life stories, you now talk about how writers can improve their narratives by considering characterisation deeply. To do this, you ask everyone on their table to refine their sensory journey to really teach the relevant person a lesson. They will need to talk in some depth about this: what might happen to the selfish person? How might the ghosts teach him/her lesson? What might the jealous person encounter, why might ghosts want to get their revenge on him/her?

Then re-run the sensory journey again, but with the envoys responding in role. So, for example, they could respond like Scrooge at the end of *A Christmas Carol*, where he implores the ghosts to believe that he will reform his ways. You might want to read a section of this dialogue or write your own script based on one of the characters to model this for your students. It's actually quite challenging to do, and takes some thought.

Now refine the journey and record the encounter in the form of a radio play, and/or write the radio script. This step is conceptually the most difficult of them all; deploy it flexibly. If you think that the people on the quest, the envoys, need to travel around a few groups so that the groups get more versed in enacting out their sensory journeys etc, then do this before embarking upon this step.

STEP 6: ENCOURAGING MORE CREATIVE EDITING, RE-DRAFTING, WRITING AND READING

Having produced a collaborative script and/or radio play, the world is your oyster! The class could now write a class novel about the haunted house, with each group writing a chapter about their allocated room. Or you could encourage individual work, with everyone writing about their allocated character and their unique journey in the haunted house.

You could jigsaw (Capel et al, 2016, p. 204) the groups by giving everyone in each group a number between 1 and 5, and then getting all 1s to sit together, all 2s to sit together etc, and then asking them to draw/map out and label/describe a complete haunted house. This is a great way of mixing groups up, and getting everyone in the class learning from each other. Other tasks might include making a

documentary about the haunted house, holding a 'reality TV show' in it, or devoting an edition of a newspaper or magazine to it.
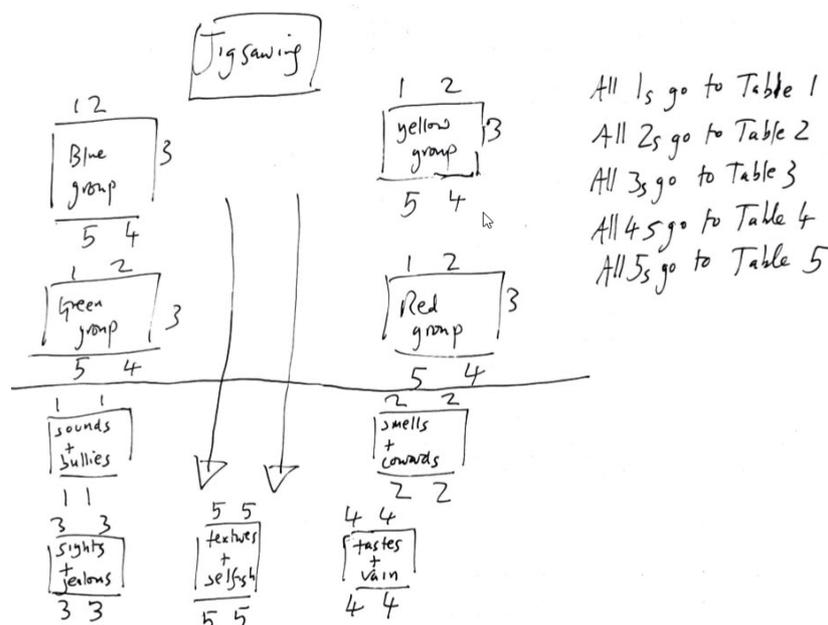

Figure 7 Jigsawing: All 1s go to a table, all 2s etc

In the above Figure 7, the top part of the diagram illustrates the class before the jigsaw happens: everyone is sitting in a group with a different number from 1-5. The teacher then tells all 1s to go to one particular table in the room, all 2s to another table etc. The bottom half of the diagram illustrates what happens when the jigsawing has happened: all 1s are sitting together, all 2s are sitting together etc. The point is that the students who have been given the same thing to think about are sitting together, sharing their ideas.

ADAPTING THESE IDEAS FOR OTHER CLASSES, TOPICS AND MODES

The principles for this project could be applied to any 'world-building' unit of work. So, for example, students could be allocated different parts of a village, town, city, country, planet or universe to imagine, take notes upon, discuss and write about. Similarly, they could be provided with photographs, video clips, poems and literary extracts to motivate and stimulate them into coming up with their own ideas. The principles of collaborative learning would all apply: students would work in groups, envoy around others, and jigsaw to share ideas.

The project could also be carried out online, using discussion forums on a platform like Moodle, which gives teachers the ability to put students into groups and allocate them different tasks, which they then share with the whole class later on.

FINDINGS

I have run this simulation with many different classes and in many different ways during my three decades of teaching pupils and teachers. My chief findings are this:

Pupils and teachers are very motivated by this idea. They love creating haunted houses and rooms together. They particularly like getting someone from their class who is not in their group to experience the room they've created.

You generate a positive feedback loop with this activity. Children love sharing ideas about spooky things, and this sharing creates a positive feedback loop. I've found that many children who are not engaged with school have a great deal of knowledge about this area.

Clarity is very important. One of the difficulties with writing this article is that I've realised this project sounds quite complicated when really it isn't. In reality, it's quite simple, but the whole thing must be done in clear steps. So, first get everyone into groups, second give them part of the haunted house to consider, and third allocate each person a sense to discuss and write about. Then go from there.

Flexibility is important. Don't plough on with the above steps if they are not working with your class. Go back to the basic idea, which is to get the groups describing and 'building' a haunted house in their imaginations and in 'real life'. If you have come up with a better idea of how to do it, do it!

Have a clear, final product in mind and model it. I modelled the audio recordings of the simulations in real time with my students: 'Welcome to the dining room of the haunted house, shut your eyes now, and smell the strange smell of gravy from the silver dish, and listen to the ghostly laughter of the guests sitting around the table...'

Get your head around jigsawing and envoys. If this article has not explained this sufficiently to you, then read other sources and have a go at it. These grouping activities work very well because they mix and match pupils, and everyone works with different people, which is very important with group work.

Teacher passion and intervention is crucial. You will find eventually that everyone gets on with the work without you having to do a thing except observe, but to begin with you'll have to work very hard to get the whole project off the ground. That means you'll need to keep walking around the groups checking to see they've got the right ideas. If pupils come up with an idea that is not something you've instructed them to do but is a good idea, then let them go for it. Don't inhibit good ideas. Equally, if the pupils are clearly not on the right track, make sure you are strict about enforcing what they should do. You'll need to be passionate about the project too; show your pupils how thrilled you are by the whole concept of the haunted house.

WHAT NEXT?

Figure 8 Summing up the strategies of the project

I hope I've shown that the combination of collaborative learning and a topic that really engages students is a winner for creative writing teachers. Once you've understood its principles and basic strategies, it is a 'high-impact, low effort' teaching tool that requires relatively little preparation and can be tweaked endlessly to suit the needs of any given class. If the teacher notices that the collaborative learning is not working, they can always ask students to write individually on their set

topic. Furthermore, it can also be adapted so that it works online; in these days when so much is shifting into the digital sphere, this is an interesting option.

The next steps for you would be to:
- Have a go yourself!
- Find some interesting poems, passages, stories etc that really chime with you about this topic.
- Consider how you might do this online. Using technologies like Zoom/Microsoft Teams/The Big Blue Button, you are able to put people into groups, and you could get students doing this simulation online.
- Learn more about social constructivism: read Watkins' work (listed below) as a starting point. When you deeply understand how collaborative learning works, you'll be much more confident about doing it.

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