



# Setting the Stage For Creativity

Emily Hearn

*“I Wrote this Poem today because I just felt like writing a poem ...Patrick, Gr. 2”*

A faltering hand rises from a group of oh so quiet seven year olds finally meeting their online mentor in person. A shy voice exclaims ‘we thought you were a teenager!’ I tell them there is a seven in my age too, but that it’s followed by an eight. Gasp! Then an onslaught of voices compares my longevity with that of their grandparents, even greats – which I am also. Now I’m *in*. They have given me that status I had before, when we were all invisible. But then they would write “You ROCK” when they liked what I was telling them about their writing.

This measures the potency – some call it magic – of WIER’s one-on-one contact between author mentors who spend 12-week terms mentoring creative work – poems and stories – and the students who send it to them online through

participating schools. (You’ll find all of us on your computer when you go to [www.wier.ca](http://www.wier.ca) and follow all the links.)

Trevor Owen, a Toronto high school teacher, was the inspiration for Writers in Electronic Residence, which he began in the 1980s. Its immediate success at this senior level prompted him to expand it to include students from kindergarten up. He asked me to assist in developing an elementary/intermediate program, since I had been giving language and music workshops in Scarborough public schools.

These workshops had led to an O.I.S.E. experiment with a few authors responding to students’ submissions online. Trevor wanted this online response to continue, even though we agreed that working with younger children would lean heavily on motivation, as in “Keep Writing!” Critique would

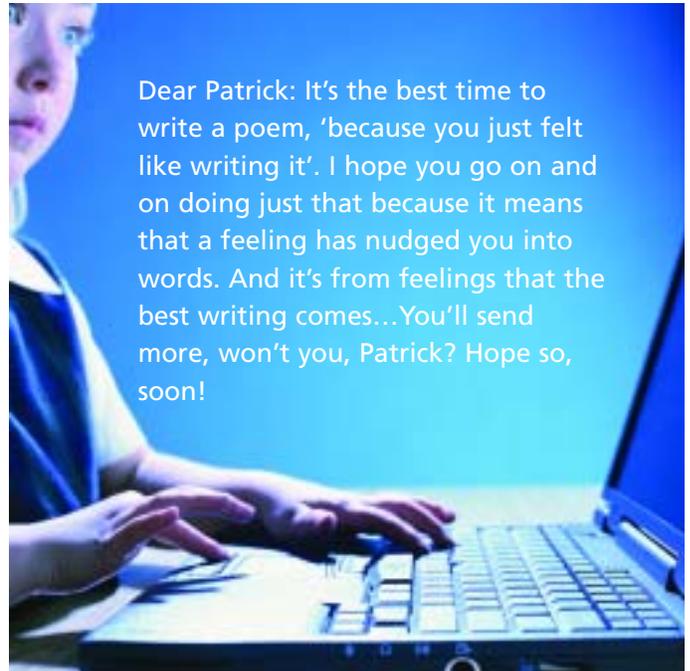
be almost nonexistent in the youngest grades and gradually become more specific as children developed with praise. We couldn't risk the damage of early discouragement, so from the beginning, the stated policy at the primary level was to reinforce the positive elements in a piece of writing and call for new work where these elements were bound to reappear, rather than concentrate too soon on revision of a presented text. For younger children, revision is only encouraged when a child asks for it; with maturation the pattern changes, and students in higher grades desire criticism.

The following example of electronic exchange gives an idea of the ease and interplay of writer mentor and budding writers at an early level.

Two winters ago when Patrick Zerr was in Grade 2 in Cougar Canyon Elementary School, B.C. he wrote a poem called "Fall Frost" in which he mentioned that "once we saw a leaf frozen in a puddle", then added his comment "I wrote this poem today because I just felt like writing a poem. It was very frosty in Tsawwassen this morning".

I answered "Dear Patrick: It's the best time to write a poem, 'because you just felt like writing it'. I hope you go on and on doing just that because it means that a feeling has nudged you into words. And it's from feelings that the best writing comes... You'll send more, won't you, Patrick? Hope so, soon!"

He replied: "Thank you for the nice response. I liked when you told me that the leaf under the ice reminded you of a leaf



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'under glass.'" (I had said that I saw a leaf perfectly outlined 'under glass' on an icy village street in England. It was a maple leaf and spelled 'home' to me).

He also received a response from Wes in a Toronto school who said "I like the part in your poem when you say 'Once I saw a leaf frozen in a puddle'. I see a lot of those in winter."

Michelle, another Torontonion wrote him and said she

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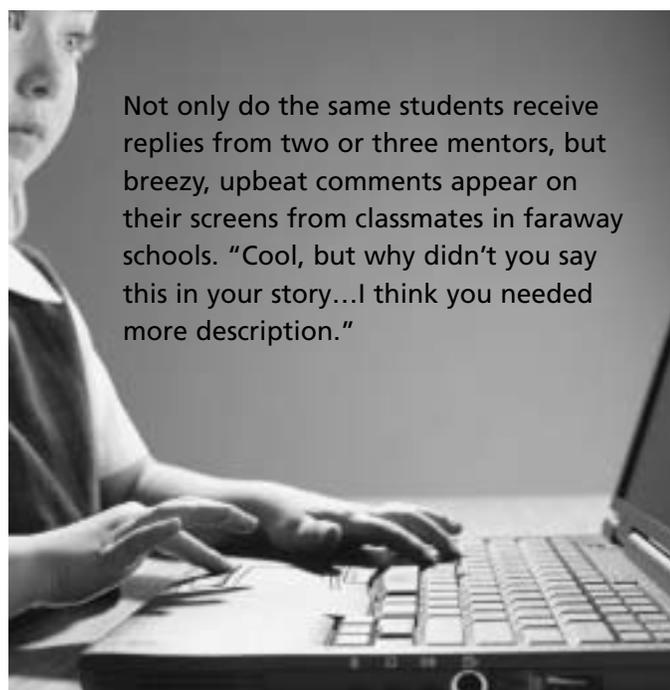
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## EN BREF

L'organisme Writers in Electronic Residence (WIER) encourage les jeunes écrivains à explorer le pouvoir de leur propre créativité en leur permettant d'avoir des échanges électroniques avec des mentors, telle l'auteure Emily Hearn qui affirme pouvoir reconnaître les futurs poètes, conteurs ou scénaristes dès leur plus jeune âge. Ces derniers manifestent, dit-elle, des dons pour l'écriture qui apparaissent tout naturellement, même dans les écrits de jeunesse. « J'encourage les jeunes qui sont manifestement doués et inspirés, tout en leur accordant le plus de latitude possible. J'estime qu'il faut leur permettre de développer leur talent sans entraves, de faire une variété d'expériences et d'apprendre à s'autocritiquer. Ils reçoivent mon plus grand compliment quand je leur dit : "Tu es un écrivain" ».



hoped he would write more, and he answered that he had written "another poem called 'piranha'. It's a dynamite poem".

The variety of my own busy career in both media and print feeds into my comments to students. Knowing that a bored child will click to another radio or TV channel or pick up another book makes me acutely aware of the common "and then, and then" syndrome that is crying out for tight plotting, shaping of text. Mention Harry Potter, and students pick up on your editing tip because they have read every word of that quick, action-packed, humorous, dramatic series.

I can spot the poet, the scriptwriter, the storyteller from the youngest age. They reflect very different writing abilities that show up naturally in some children's work. For myself, I encourage but give widest berth to the obviously gifted, inspired youngster because that talent should be allowed to grow unimpeded, to experiment widely, to be self-critical. My brief and highest praise is "you are a writer".

In the '60s and 70s, I was a children's scriptwriter for CBC radio and TVO television, I published poetry and picture books, and for 16 years I wrote a popular monthly 'comic' strip for OWL magazine, the 'Mighty Mites', with artist, Mark Thurman. I had helped edit elementary school readers with Dr. John McInnes for Nelson/Canada scouring the country – neat job! - for fellow Canadian writers. Until then most textbooks featured English and American authors. The writers who flocked to my hotel rooms in provincial capitals would say pathetically "You don't have to pay me, I just want to see myself in print". Look at Canadian children's literature today – burgeoning, world famous, paid! And a percentage of Canadian content is a must in educational publishing.

Now, those cross-country jaunts reinforce my WIER experience, in which children send writing from schools anywhere in the country. When a story pops onto my screen from Victoria or St. John's, Okotoks, Thunder Bay or Montreal, I can picture these young authors in their surroundings. Place does make a difference in any writer's work. Not only do the same students receive replies from two or three mentors, but breezy, upbeat comments appear on their screens from classmates in faraway schools. "Cool, but why didn't you say this in your story...I think you needed more description." "I loved the fun of that witch asking the prince for a recipe but I wish you had written it out for us too." "Your poem was sad and it made me cry because my mother died too."

They learn that just "liking" something isn't enough; saying "why" or questioning shows the respect that they would like to receive for their own efforts. They are building an informed audience for each other's work and understanding what publication means to their mentors because it is happening to them.

The only classroom teaching I've done was in nursery schools, and later passing on ideas of Creative Music and Dance to teachers in Early Childhood Education – just enough to see each child as a unique person and to give me insight into the challenge educators face as they foster creativity. I watch and admire them when I am in schools.

Children are born with creativity; parents and teachers nurture it as best they can. From birth, their senses react to what surrounds them, and from those messages they assemble their own world. It is the educators' role, as early as daycare and ever after, to offer a broad range of stimuli to kickstart this process and keep it flourishing so that each child can achieve full potential. It's a tall order, dependent on resources and attentive adults.

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My own youngsters were in preschool when I was asked to help out with music. The emphasis I saw there was to "set the stage" with predictable locations and materials for play.

Children create through their play, trying everything on for size, locomotion, running, riding, tumbling, dressing up, playing house, splashing paint, brushing it in long lines that wiggle and curve, pounding clay and moulding it, fitting puzzles, chanting, banging a range of percussion instruments, dancing and chanting the whole time. “Pink and blue hullabaloo” shouts one and the others take it up in chorus. They listen to stories and make up their own as a teacher takes down their words.

Keen elementary teachers are accomplished in setting a stage within which creativity can flow naturally. They read to their pupils, encourage them to read widely themselves, then let them go with their own opinions, inspirations, imagination, suggesting they “listen” to words they choose and pace their flow. Ideally they want what children write to come from “inside”, but they nudge also with theme topics.

As mentors, we can see how teachers are steering students gently towards writing techniques: A “100th day of school” project with Grades 1 and 2 produced earliest sense of the form of “story”; “kites” in Grade 2 drew from “experience”; a Grade 3 class recording “how it had painted a picture” transferred techniques they had used to a growing awareness of “how writing is done”; the sensual stimulus in other sets on “colour” and “sound” make writing come “alive”. Sport lists show the “power” of active verbs; “recreating legends” develops imagination; an “I Am” theme instils writers’ self-confidence.

Teachers’ approval nurtures confidence, and students become more and more self-critical as growing maturity widens their range of technique. This is what mentors reinforce. However different our ‘author’ voices and the ages we address, we are all setting the stage for an atmosphere of welcoming trust and encouragement. Within this, we temper our critiques to what we gauge can be absorbed, based on age, first language, or special needs.

Teachers read the mentors’ individual responses to the whole class, which then discusses them with a growing realization that writing is an art with its own techniques. Like dance, painting, music, sport, it calls for practice and experimentation, vision and integrity. By Grade 7, this realization may lead students to accept the challenge of creating new, expressive words. Michael Katsap writes that colours are “scurrymixing”, “sign of night, moonlonely rising”. Young writers are daring to go out on a limb, searching for their own voices

I wrote a poem once about something totally different, but it is what happens constantly here in the WIER Dance:

*I tossed a pebble in the pond  
Plip!  
it fell  
with no more sound  
but all around  
and all around  
the water started  
dancing*



I began with this poem in a preface I wrote for our year-end print publication, called *The Wiertaps* (available online). It continues, “In this issue you read the poems and creative fiction we mentors have chosen for their originality, passion, concern, curiosity, sense of wonder. Children write, we respond, they quiz us, other students make pithy comments, teachers talk together. The water dances up a storm until end of term closes it all down. For now. Many schools come back for more, new ones ask to dip their toes.

“This lively issue runs from beginning writers through to those embarking on secondary education. In the past separate publications for elementary and intermediate haven’t made as evident as this one does how the capacity for critical analysis develops step by step with maturation. It flourishes exuberantly when it is grounded in an earlier policy of encouragement and teacher-guided exposure to wide range of reading and to frequent writing. From Patrick [quoted above] up through the grades you can track writers’ self-confidence becoming assured, ready for critique.

“Witness the depth of the supportive interchange [mentors] . . . have with their intermediate students who also are writing about “how they feel”, “what they see” at the same time as they are learning to experiment fearlessly and to question techniques of expression that are new to them. Now their writing is advancing to skilled, perceptive, engaging expression.

“Beginning a new piece of work, all writers summon everything that comes to mind and emotion about their theme. Reams of words tumble onto a page. This is the stage we accept with our early primary-age children – just get it out. By grades four and upwards they are introduced carefully to editing: slash, burn, nothing’s sacred, change order for emphasis. So that by the intermediate level most are showing awareness that from tireless shaping distinctive content and style emerge. They have an inkling of the truth of Michael Ondaatje’s recent mention of editing, ‘writing everything for months or years, then shaping the content into a new form, until it is almost a newly discovered story.’ What a contribution the WIER DANCE makes to this!”

I’ll end with Neetika Sidana, Grade 6 :

*Curious, curious  
I may be  
But the questions don’t come  
from the throat,  
Rather from the heart. 🌀*

**Emily Hearn** is a poet and children’s writer of songs and stories, media and picture books who acts often as an online mentor for young people sending their creative writing to Writers in Electronic Residence (national) and Writers’ Connection (Greater Toronto Area).