

The Time Devil runs amok: How I improved my creative practice by adopting a multimodal approach for a specific audience.

**Key words:**

Creative writing

Remediation

Multimodality

Teaching

Reciprocity

**Abstract**

This research illustrates how teacher-writers can improve their craft and pedagogy by writing for a specific audience, namely school children. It also illustrates why they might do so. It interrogates what was learnt from an innovative collaboration between a university teacher-education department, an inner-city secondary school and the United Kingdom's National Maritime Museum (NMM).

Multimodality (Barnard 2019) inspired the project: local spaces, institutional settings, historical objects, photographs, pictures, time-travelling films and narratives motivated the teacher-writer and participants to read and respond imaginatively to the world.

The author found that the project caused him to “remediate” his own practice: to transfer “existing skills in order to tackle new genres” (Barnard 2019: 121). This process enabled him to become a more effective writer and teacher. The research shows that the problem of multimodal overload – having too much choice regarding what to write about and the many forms writing can take – can be circumnavigated if participants are given both autonomy and constraints. It illustrates in some depth how the concept of reciprocity is vital to adopt if writers are to improve their craft.

## **Introduction**

*The Time Devil* project was multimodal in that it used many different modes – drawings, objects, artifacts, pictures, photographs, sound and video recordings, movies, drama, embodied learning – to inspire all the participants: myself (a teacher-writer) teachers, pupils, museum staff and creative writers.

Barnard explains that multimodality:

...embraces everything from pen and paper to microblogging to websites to video games, for example, and to technologies that have yet to be invented...The experience of writing a story is not only different between writers, it alters for each writer between situations and over time. (2019: 71)

Multimodality informed the whole “learning trajectory” of *The Time Devil* project (Wenger 1999: 149). This meant teachers, museum educators, creative writers and pupils came together to see how the “culturally-shaped resources” (Kress 2005: 2) of a national museum, the United Kingdom’s National Maritime Museum (NMM) might be used to help teachers and their pupils learn to read and write more effectively.

Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen in *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (2006) show that visual learning has its own “grammar”: rules or conventions. Crucially, visuals and writing work together in a multiplicity of ways: they help readers better understand the stories, characters, themes and settings, as well as much else.

## My research question and methodology

My key research question throughout the project was:

*How can I improve my writing and teaching for a very specific audience – 11–13-year-old school children -- by being multimodal?*

As we will see, I set out from the start to use many modes to facilitate my growth as a teacher and writer. Furthermore, I saw the process of writing and teaching as integral; I was writing to educate myself and others in a variety of topics as well as educating myself to write more effectively.

The best way of researching this question was by using an Action Research model (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000: 567-605: 595-6). The aim was for me as the creative writer to “plan, implement, review and evaluate an intervention designed to improve” (Cohen et al. 2011: 129) my own writing for a specific readership. My task was to write an educational and entertaining script for secondary school children.

Following the Action Research model, I included as many relevant people as possible in the planning, writing and re-drafting of the script. I reviewed regularly my script’s effectiveness based on all the participants’ feedback, re-planning things based on my new insights (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000: 567-605: 595-6: Cohen et al. 2011: 129).

I used a range of data sources for evaluating the success of the project which included: quantitative surveys, semi-structured interviews of the students,

my own observations in the field, video and audio recordings, photographs and exit interviews with the pupils and teachers.

My theoretical approach was qualitative, applying “bricolage” to triangulate my data (Kincheloe and Berry 2004: 4): this meant I gathered data from various sources and used several theoretical approaches to interpret it.

Above all, I applied theories of multimodality to interpret my data, primarily deploying Josie Barnard’s concepts of multimodal creative writing and “remediation” (2019 121: 2017). My findings illustrate how I deployed her theories to understand how I improved my teaching and writing. I also used, to a lesser degree, notions of multimodal learning (Kress 2005) and critical literacy (Mayo 1995; Pahl & Rowsell 2005: 2011) to analyse my data. All these concepts are interlinked because learning from different modes involves developing literacy skills which are “critical”: namely involve developing pupils’ deep questioning, collaborative and meaning-making skills.

Great care was always taken to be ethical: the school, parents and pupils were all consulted in depth, and the pupils represented in the text, photos and videos all gave their informed consent for publication. I followed the university’s procedures for gaining ethical approval.

## An explanation of the project

The Time Devil project began in September 2016, when I was educating beginning teachers (PGCE students) to teach English to 11-18-year olds. We often placed – and still place – students at X Comprehensive. I had forged close links with the school not only because of our teacher-education partnership, but also because the previous academic year I had written a script *Dreaming of a Better World* (Gilbert 2016a) which was read by 12 and 13-year-old students (Year 8) to help them improve their literacy skills. A major conclusion drawn

from the *Dreaming of a Better World* project in September 2016 was that the pupils needed to find reading and writing within the school curriculum more motivating. In October 2016, the teachers who I had worked with on the aforementioned project, Ms V and Mr T, agreed with me that one of the ways of motivating pupils to read more enthusiastically was by including representations of X pupils in a fictional script I would write for them.

To do this, we attained the agreement from six Year 8 pupils (12-13-year-olds) at the school, all respected by their peers, to include them as protagonists in the story I would write for them. We believed representing real-life pupils would help their peers make deeper connections with the text. The pupils at X rarely read material where children of their age, ethnicity or geographical location were represented. The six students who were chosen were all intended to be role models for other students. This was something that Ms V, who taught the six students, felt strongly should be the case: she was concerned that the project could be an excuse for some pupils to misbehave. By putting respected, well-behaved pupils in the script, this might encourage better behaviour. There is some evidence that many children are motivated to read about characters they identify with and respect (Perez 1984; Pahl and Rowsell 2005; Chadwick 2012).

Furthermore, we felt, as had been the case with *Dreaming of a Better World*, that we would place the narrative in the local area, commencing it near the school itself and working, if possible, with another neighbouring institution, to set the action there. We all agreed that if the pupils were able to recognise and possibly walk around the places which were represented in the script, then this could again generate interest.

We decided that we would ask the National Maritime Museum (NMM) if we could set most of the action: the NMM was local to X comprehensive and yet many pupils had never visited it. I had forged some links with the museum: its Learning team was interested in developing connections with local schools and the university. Our six students were also enthusiastic. In November of

2016, Ms V, the six pupils, three post-graduate creative writers, all of whom I taught on a Masters course, and myself, met at the NMM. We looked around the exhibits, and the six pupils chose one object of interest in their allocated gallery for us to focus upon. After that, we talked to the Learning Manager and curators about our ideas. During the latter half of this day, we sketched a basic outline for our script using the six chosen objects from the museum as stimuli.

## The process of writing the script

Using the basic outline, the objects and suggestions gleaned from our discussions, I wrote the text of *The Time Devil* from December 2016 until March 2017. It contained a “teaching” script” and a “fictional” script; both were creative pieces of writing which sought to engage the specific audience of 11-14-year-olds at the X comprehensive. The challenge here as a writer and teacher was to motivate this audience, which was so diverse in backgrounds and abilities. The “teaching script” was designed so that pupils read it in groups in the form of a play: it contained all the major “learning points” – chiefly about developing literacy skills. The teaching script also included activities for the pupils to do in class and at home.

A “fictional script” was nested within the “teaching” script and tells the story of a malevolent Time Devil hijacking the six X pupils and placing them in the National Maritime Museum, where they time-travel to the eras of the various exhibits the six “real” pupils chose in the NMM in November 2016.

In March-April 2017, the six pupils, their teachers (Ms V and Mr T), postgraduate creative writers and a curator at the NMM read the script and offered feedback, which I responded to: see the latter sections for more on this.

In April, the script was printed and then read in class from May-June by Ms V’s Year 8 (12-13-year olds) class and Mr T’s Year 7 class (11-12-year-

olds), who I observed reading and responding to the script. In mid-July 2017, these two classes and I toured the museum on two different days, and filmed mock-documentaries based on the fictional *Time Devil* story there.

### **Reciprocal Teaching and multimodal pedagogies**

From the outset, all the teachers involved – Ms V, Mr T and I -- realised that we wanted to include multimodal activities in the “teaching” script, as well as create an engaging story in the “fictional script”. Some research has focused upon the beneficial effects of teachers writing for and with their students to develop their expressive writing skills (Cremin and Oliver 2017). There is much less research examining the ways in which teacher-writers can motivate reading, particularly at secondary school (Cremin and Oliver 2017: 291-292). Furthermore, there is even less explicit research showing how teacher-educators – as opposed to teachers -- who are creative writers can help nurture creative reading and writing skills by writing for targeted pupils.

As has been discussed, multimodality informed every aspect of the writing and teaching process: the teachers were inspired by the multimodal affordances of the local area and the museum, and wished to use objects, pictures, videos, gallery spaces, parks and streets to inspire the students at X to “read the word and the world” (Kress 2005: Pahl and Rowsell 2005: Freire and Macedo, 1987). The philosophy of Paulo Freire (Freire 1970: 1996; Mayo 1995; Mayo 2004; Smidt 2010) informed the project in that we wanted the students to develop not only their functional literacy skills but also their multimodal literacies. In order to assist this, we deployed a specific reading strategy which research has shown to be effective in nurturing collaborative and independent reading skills: Reciprocal Teaching, sometimes known as Reciprocal Reading (Palincsar and Brown 1984; Cooper and Grieve 2009; Fischer Family Trust Literacy 2018; Gilbert 2018). Reciprocal Teaching involves all pupils becoming

teachers of each other (Palincsar and Brown 1984) and learning from each other through critical questioning. This shifts the power relations in the classroom and provides a space for the development of critical literacy (Pahl and Rowsell 2005: 114). In brief, Reciprocal Teaching involves one pupil becoming a teacher who encourages everyone else in their group to:

Read a passage.

Summarise what they have read (develop understanding)

Sum up how much they understand (comprehension monitoring)

Ask questions to help their understanding (questioning)

Clarify anything they don't understand and raise any other points they have about the text. (clarification)

After a passage has been read, the role of teacher passes on to the next pupil: the aim is that over time every pupil becomes a teacher. (turn-taking) (Summarised from Palincsar and Brown 1984: Gilbert 2018)

The idea was that, as the story progressed and the pupils became more familiar with how to teach reciprocally, the teaching script deliberately became much briefer, with the simple instruction for the group to reciprocally teach what they had just read.

But before they reached that stage, they needed to know how to “do” Reciprocal Teaching. The teaching script models this in depth. It also showed students how to perform specific duties within their group: these roles included “summarizer”, “motivator”, “questioner”, “assessor”, “learning to learn chief”, which are all explained in the script. Here is the beginning of the script which outlines the duties the six members of the group will take:

TEACHER: I don't like reading.

QUESTIONER: Hey, aren't you supposed to be a teacher? Aren't all teachers supposed to like reading?

MOTIVATOR: Good point, Questioner, as the Motivator in the group, I have to say that telling your students that you don't like reading is a bit demotivating!

ASSESSOR: And as the Assessor, I would have to grade that teaching strategy as unsatisfactory. I don't think any school inspector would be happy to hear a teacher say that!

LEARNING TO LEARN CHIEF: As Learning to Learn Chief (L2LC), I think we need to give the teacher a break: my job, which is being in charge of Learning to Learn is about helping people improve their learning by thinking about their learning and what works for them and what doesn't. My first question is: what do we exactly mean by a teacher and what is expected of them?

SUMMARIZER: As Summarizer, I would have to sum up the meaning of being a teacher as someone who helps other people learn. (Gilbert 2017: 28)

Each group member learns the Reciprocal Teaching process as they read, and are encouraged to offer their own views about what these different roles mean, and how they might help them become better readers. In the above extract, I start it with the teacher (who is read by a pupil) saying they don't like reading because I wanted to raise the issues of motivation, assessing, learning to learn, and summarizing in connection with reading. Much research indicates that all these elements come into play in the secondary classroom when children are reading (Palinscar and Brown 1984: Gilbert 2018). By writing a script which explains the pedagogy behind reading in a relatively simple way, I hoped to make the sorts of skills and attitudes that pupils need to acquire to become confident readers very explicit.

As the pupils read through both the teaching and fictional script, they had to complete a learning journal (Bolton 2010 Chapter 7: Moon 2006). Exercises were provided at the end of each lesson which cultivated their independent study and research skills.

Here are the suggested activities after second lesson:

Continue reading another book/text related to the theme of time travel, noting down in your Learning Journal: what is happening in the book, what you like about it, what you think might happen next.

Keep a list of useful vocabulary to learn and love.

Find out about the National Maritime Museum by going on its website and skimming/scanning what is in the collection, why people might want to visit there, what interests you about the museum.

Write about how you are finding the Reciprocal Reading so far, outlining your thoughts and feelings about how it went in the lesson. Discuss your thoughts and feelings with your friends, carers/parents and teacher.

Watch some time-travel films, TV programmes and review them. (Gilbert 2017: 55)

The emphasis here is for pupils to make connections between the script and the outside world, either by: watching/reading texts they enjoy; by collaborating with important people such as family members; or by researching online. Thus, pupils develop their multimodality by becoming familiar with, and more proficient in, navigating various multimodal reading pathways needed to watch TV/films with a creative and critical mindset; to learn how to skim and scan webpages; to choose texts that interest them about time travel (Kress 2005: Pahl and Rowsell 2005).

Reciprocal Teaching is multimodal because it encourages students to use their knowledge of the world -- objects, pictures, photographs or whatever is deemed suitable - to aid their understanding of texts. It is “dialogic” in that it encourages meaningful, open-ended dialogue about multimodal texts (Palinscar and Brown 1984; Pahl and Rowsell 2005: 2011; Fisher 2009).

The learning activities in *The Time Devil* were deliberately open-ended, with multimodal tasks set to develop “flow”: the ability to release one’s own natural creative energies without feeling inhibited by an internal critic (Csikszentmihalyi 1997). In this sense, the tasks were there to develop their creative writing; part of developing its craft involves nurturing flow (Gilbert 2016b).

With respect to my key research question, I found that writing these Reciprocal Teaching scripts helped me clarify in my own mind what the essence of Reciprocal Teaching was. I found that turning Reciprocal Teaching into a play made it much more understandable for me and helped me clarify its steps. As was the case at other times during the project, a process of remediation occurred whereby I used my skills as a creative writer to transfer my “existing

skill” as an educator familiar with Reciprocal Teaching into a “different genre” (Barnard 2019: 121). More of this later on.

## Overcoming multimodal overload: mindsets and strategies

One of the major difficulties for the participants at the beginning of the project – myself, the teachers and the six chosen pupils - was that of “multimodal overload”: too much choice, too much to see, too much to respond to. In particular, there was the problem of the NMM being a large national museum. It was very hard to know where to start when given a free reign to write a script set in it. Concomitantly, given that our main purpose was to foster multimodality amongst our pupils, there was no clear brief about what topics, subjects, characters or historical eras to focus upon. We were not using the museum in the way that history teachers might, namely to focus on a historical topic. There were a bewildering array of galleries, films, photographs, pictures, objects and spaces which we could use in the story. What should we pay attention to?

Working closely with Ms V, we decided to nurture a sense of autonomy in our six targeted pupils as much as possible and require them to provide us with specific things to focus upon (Kress & Selander 2012: 266). Much research shows that pupils enjoy their learning more if they are given the freedom to explore within reasonable parameters (Grainger et al. 2003: 2005). Gorard and See (2013) argue that nurturing autonomous learning is a particularly valuable form of pedagogy to do with disadvantaged students: five of our six students came from deprived socio-economic backgrounds and the two classes contained an above average number of pupils provided with free school meals in the United Kingdom, a key indicator of poverty (Gorard et al. 2017). The luxury of working with a small group to begin with in November 2016 was that we could

give them a large degree of freedom and attention in a way which would not have been possible with a class of thirty.

As has been explained, in November 2016, our six pupils toured the museum and, following our instructions, each one chose one object/exhibit from six separate rooms. This worked very well: the combination of granting autonomy – letting the students roam freely – and constraints – they had to focus upon one gallery and find one object – meant that the issue of “multimodal overload” was avoided. The students reported that they enjoyed the “hunt” for an object that interested them: there was an exciting quest here which was flexible but also precise.

The six pupils took photos of their chosen objects on their phones and discussed them with each other, their teachers and me. This dialogue was crucial: it fostered what is known as “dialogic teaching” (Fisher 2009) in that the communication was reciprocal (Palinscar and Brown 1984; Fischer Family Trust Literacy 2018; Gilbert 2018): the educators learnt from their pupils and vice versa. Ms V and I were able to give our views on what we thought of the objects, and the six pupils could offer their ideas about what sort of stories these objects provoked. In a certain sense, their lack of knowledge about the history behind the objects liberated them. They suggested things like making the pictures come alive, staging gun battles, flying over countries and sitting on meteorites at this point: all events that I incorporated in the script. This process of deep listening to the pupils was a vital part of me developing as a writer; I found it particularly inspiring to write about objects they cared about.

It became clear to the adults as we walked around with them that the information in the museum presumed a great deal of prior knowledge about British and world history which the pupils did not have. Galleries on the East India company, trade and colonialism, the Atlantic Slave Trade, Nelson, Navy, and Nation, 18<sup>th</sup> century England, the Battle of Jutland and pre-1900 naval art were all very new topics to the pupils.

To assist us with understanding the artefacts in their “real-life” contexts, a dialogic, reciprocal relationship was also formed with the staff at the museum (Rowe et al. 2002). The Learning Manager at the NMM and several curators also met with us. This meeting was informative, but the students were reluctant to ask many questions or talk much because they were faced with several unknown adults in quite a formal setting. However, the teachers were more confident. The “implicit assumption” of many museums is that staff produce “narratives” and “visitors either accept or reject the museum’s productions” (Rowe et al. 2002: 97) was interrogated in this meeting by both the NMM staff and educators. The NMM staff and educators asked the pupils questions such as “What stories did the objects make you think of?”. This approach questioned the idea that the museum should only be viewed as the producer of historical facts that should be responded to in a factual fashion. Instead, the museum became a place where fantasies could be created using its “multimodal affordances” (Pahl and Rowsell 2005: 34-5). Theorists of multimodal literacy have pointed out that multimodality produces new “reading paths” (Kress 2005: Pahl and Rowsell 2005: 34; Jewitt et al 2009: 10) because objects, pictures, videos, gallery spaces do not offer “linear ways of reading” – i.e. you start at the beginning and finish at the end – because “texts are no longer straightforward” and allow “the user to choose where you go in a text” (Pahl and Rowsell: 35).

When I showed the six pupils a draft of the script in March 2017, they provided a great deal of feedback: again, a strong reciprocal relationship was formed. How I responded to their comments is best understood by relating it to the rubric Barnard posits is indicative of a multimodal writer (2019: 33-42). They made quite a few suggestions about changing the sequence of the story which led me to do a great deal of what Barnard characterises as “chopping and stitching” (33). She argues that there are significant links between “drafting, sewing and baking” (34) in that a writer is often “cutting up a draft with

scissors, rearranging passage until they formed a more effective narrative”. Now that I had a sharpened sense of my audience from the pupils’ feedback, I was able to “chop and stitch” more confidently. Using a facility on my word processing programme called “Headings” I could easily move scenes around. For example, my six pupils felt that the scene that opens on Prince Frederick’s barge was lost in the middle of the play and would work better much earlier on in the story; using Headings, I simply dragged it to earlier part of the story, and then was able to see how it worked by re-reading the text again.

The pupils also assisted considerably with what Barnard calls “code-switching”: “adapting language so that it is appropriate for different genres while retaining a distinct, overarching identity” (2019: 35). They suggested at certain points that my use of colloquialisms were out of date and inappropriate. For example, they did not like my use of the term “tramp”, when a fictional pupil mocked someone at the beginning of the script; I changed the word to a “very dirty person”. Although this phrase is clunkier to my ears, it is more descriptive and less laden with prejudice. Furthermore, it is much more in keeping with the “identity” of the language as a whole, which seeks to undercut stereotypes and commonly held assumptions.

Barnard points out:

Multimodal writing practice involves being able to relatively quickly and accurately assess and delineate the particular codes, conventions and constraints of a new medium (2019: 38)

This was particularly true for me as I was working with the new medium of having a fictional script nested within a teaching script – something I had not encountered or read before – and so I had to figure out the “particular codes, conventions and constraints” (38) of writing for 11–13-year-old inner city children by listening carefully to my six pupils. A particular constraint I realised I had not paid enough attention to in the first draft was the pupils’ attention spans. The pupils reported back to me that all the scenes were too long, too full

of historical information and lacked engaging endings which made them want to read on. This upset me privately, but I held back on justifying my writing, and listened instead. Then I took some time to let their criticisms land over the next few weeks. I cycled along the river back to the museum and revisited the relevant galleries. This period of reflection and relative calm allowed for what Barnard calls “expert intuition”: “flashes of conviction, which could even seem illogical but which a practitioner trusts and acts on” (81). A sudden insight made me open my laptop in the museum’s café, create a new version of the script (I saved my previous version) and set about drastically pruning my scenes, cutting out great swathes of exposition about the history, deleting most of the dialogue that ended the scenes, and instead setting up a narrative trope of the Time Devil engineering things so that each main character in the scenes – fictional representations of the pupils – is attacked by historical figures who are enraged at the pupils’ meddling. Because now I had a much stronger sense of what the pupils wanted to read in my head, I was able to write much more specifically for them.

When I showed the pupils these new scenes, they were much happier and very pleased I had listened so carefully to them, but they still had an issue: how did their fictional avatars manage to survive after being attacked so savagely? If the script was a computer game, then their avatars would have lost. I took some time to consider this issue. It was not until a few days later when I played a computer game where characters can ‘buy’ protection that a solution came to me: the Time Devil could provide special protection for the pupils so that the bullets, spears, arrows and collisions that they endure do not affect them.

I also worked with the postgraduate writers on the creative writing MA I taught on. There were five of them, most of them were either teachers or parents of children who were a similar age to the X pupils. They responded warmly and in-depth. They pointed out parts where there were typos, inconsistencies and a distinct lack of drama. One student was very helpful going through the script

carefully and providing me with a carefully annotated copy full of suggestions and corrections in the word processing programme I used.

## Multimodality, time travel, intertextuality and using artefacts

In November 2016, the notion of writing a time-travelling script had not been considered, but as we all talked about the objects the pupils had chosen, we realised a time-travelling story – using tropes from *Night at the Museum* (2006) and *Doctor Who* (BBC 2020) - might be a good way of threading the disparate elements together. The idea of creating a Time “Devil” – as opposed to Doctor Who’s benign Time Lord - came into focus.

The time-travelling concept helped bring together the diverse items that the students chose into a recognisable “genre” narrative; each student would time-travel to a period when the exhibit played a significant part in history. The following students chose these artefacts:

- C. chose Prince Frederick’s Barge, which sailed on the Thames in 1736 (NMM, 2020)
- T. chose a painting of Nelson’s death (1805) at the Battle of Trafalgar (Devis, 1807)
- N. chose a cannon ball which killed a young boy during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Opium war 1856 (Royal Museums Greenwich, 2020a)
- P. chose a 19<sup>th</sup> century painting of a comet seen in South Africa in 1843 (Smythe, 1843)
- F. chose an African drum from a Nigerian culture destroyed by the British Navy in the late 1890s (Royal Museums Greenwich, 2020b)
- M. chose a huge German kettle from the Jutland 1916: WWI’s Greatest Sea Battle (NMM, 2018)

About a week after our museum visit in November 2016, having talked at length to the students about their use of social media and the apps on their phones, I imagined a time-travelling app which could trigger the story. I called

it the Timebook (as a pastiche of Facebook), and conceived that it was set up by the malignant Time Devil. I thought a good place to begin the story would be by having two of the six pupils downloading a fictional Timebook app onto their phones. I wanted to represent the Time Devil in a non-human form and so I made it a large black bird: I had at the back of my mind Ted Hughes’ *Crow* (1995). Hughes wrote a series of poems about this trickster figure, who is as ancient as time itself. Crow is constantly ruining things for everyone – God, the earth, humans, animals – with his violent, terrifying pranks. The Time Devil, as imagined initially by me and then by all the other participants, has a very similar spirit: it hijacks the students and throws them into different epochs.

The genre of the time-travelling fantasy lent itself beautifully to embracing the multimodality of the project. As Smith and Shen argue science fiction is:

a literary genre that incorporates imaginative content including futuristic technology and scientific discoveries—constructed through multiple modes (text, visuals, sound, and animation) and digital formats (e.g., hyperlinked text, Scratch animations, Pixton comics, infographics) (2017: 85)

Our project shared similarities with Smith and Shen’s use of science fiction narratives, which they used to inspire collaborative student-led investigations and creative responses. Both our projects involved using multimodality to “scaffold” – to assist with – students’ reading and writing (Pritchard 2008: 25).

The physical act of walking around the museum many times and engaging in my own multimodality – viewing and re-imagining the objects, soundscapes, gallery spaces, pictures, photographs, maps etc – was vital in spurring me on to write what felt like a very daunting project. Barnard’s research shows that creative writers greatly benefit from taking this multimodal approach to learning and writing (2019 Chapter 2) which can include “remediating” their practice. As has been mentioned, this involves the writer “looking to existing skills and prior experience” which they then adapt or apply

them “in new contexts as part of a process of, in effect, collaborating with him or herself” (Barnard 2017: 278).

As had occurred when I wrote the teaching script (see Reciprocal Teaching and multimodal pedagogies section) the process of “remediation” happened with me as a writer as I looked to my “existing skills and prior experience”: in particular, I recalled how I had written a historical novel a few years before and how I’d written creatively for teenagers just the year before. Then I adapted these “existing skills” to writing the script. For me, it was the embodied experience of walking around the museum which was inspiring; it gave me a clarity which sitting at my computer had not afforded. I was able to “remediate” myself by taking a childish delight in the space, the lighting, the objects and interactive digital exhibits which punctuate the museum, honestly acknowledging to myself what I knew and what I didn’t. I became relaxed enough to acknowledge that I had done similar things previously. It was this remediation which helped me go back to my laptop and start typing my script confidently. Walking around the twenty-first century museum had helped me realise:

the creative potential of writing in the twenty-first century and more effectively embrace existing and emerging opportunities provided by interactive digital technologies (Barnard 2017: 275)

The more I investigated the history of the objects and read, the more engaged I became. I used the museum’s library, the Caird Library and Archive, to research the history some of the objects, including finding some wonderful stories about Prince Frederick’s Barge in particular. I developed my own critical literacy in that I became increasingly aware of the social justice issues at stake. Caffrey and Rogers note that museum learning can prompt students to take “social action against bullying and discrimination by dramatizing diversity and racism with creative writing and multicolored images” (2018: 105). This was what happened to me: I became a learner who took a form of “social action” by

exploring issues connected with “discrimination” and “racism”. In particular, I became angry about the way British colonialist actions had bullied and discriminated against so many peoples and countries. This anger permeates the script. In this sense, my script is motivated by a desire to use creative writing to “decolonise” the curriculum, that is to use creative writing to explore the “ways in which knowledge is produced, propagated and perpetuated through White, Western perspectives” (Begum & Saini 2019: 196). My creative response to these modes was very intertextual (Allen 2011) in that my story spoke and responded to so many artefacts; my craft was, in part, developed by feeling liberated to be so intertextual.

### **Multimodality, science fiction and learning about local history**

The introductory scene, set near the school, gives a taste of what is to come. Four of the pupils receive a phone call from two of their friends who have downloaded the “TimeBook app”. These two, unknown to everyone else, are trapped in another time zone, but are in a nearby geographical location. The four pupils, concerned for their friends, decide to be late for school, which is just about to start. They hurry to the place where their distressed friends say they are and are hijacked by the Time Devil and sent time-travelling into the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The scene they now see is based on a true event that happened in the local area, Deptford Bridge, in the late medieval era: King Henry VII massacred peasants (taking part in the Cornish Rebellion of 1497) who had marched on London and were protesting against the high taxes he was imposing. The students escape the carnage by using the Timebook app on their phones, which flings them into a time-vortex and takes them to the National Maritime Museum.

When the X classes read the script and later toured the local park near where the massacre took place, many of them expressed surprise about the killings. None of them, including the teachers, were aware it had happened. Nor was I until I researched the script. A discussion about the ways in which leaders abuse their powers ensued both in class and at the approximate site of the massacre. Most pupils became more critically aware about the nature of power and knowledge, talking about the injustice of the massacre. “They only wanted enough money to eat,” one pupil said to me. As Freire and Macedo argue “to shape history is to be present in it, not merely represented in it” (1987: 65). Here we can see that it was the craft of writing creatively about historical events which led to these moments of realisations; my research into the scene and my representation of it in the script had an impact upon me and my readers.

### **Multimodality, time travel and counter-factual learning and writing**

After the first scene, each of the fictional representations of the pupils has their own adventure with the object that their “real” counterparts chose in November 2016. In order to bring consistency and drama to the narrative, I engineered the story so that the Time Devil gives every pupil the choice to change history - or not.

This “counter-factual” approach is now familiar to many historians and informed my narrative (Ferguson 1998). It also enabled me to use the Time Devil as a voice to inform the student (and the audience) about the relevant historical details in an interesting way. Here, T., with the help of the Time Devil, heals Lord Nelson by stepping into Arthur William Devis’s painting “Death of Nelson, 21<sup>st</sup> October 1805” which is in the NMM. The script reads:

T.: OK, but I’m getting all covered in blood! It’s all warm and sticky! Yuck!

TIME DEVIL: There are some special wet wipes in the First Aid Kit; they'll help clean you up when you're finished.

LORD NELSON: What are these bandages that I'm being wrapped in? Oh my goodness, I am suddenly feeling much, much better!

WILLIAM BEATTY, SURGEON: My surgery has worked, Lord Nelson!

DR: Praise be the Lord God! He has healed you!

T.: And everyone watched in amazement as Lord Nelson got up from his death bed and smiled.

LORD NELSON: Victory is ours, we have won the Battle of Trafalgar, and I am very much alive!

TIME DEVIL: Ha, ha, ha! You have no idea how much you've messed up the history books T.! Just think: there's no Nelson's column in Trafalgar Square because of this! There are no pictures of the death of Nelson and he becomes a bit of a forgotten hero, to be honest. The only person who is happy about it is Emma Hamilton!

T.: Who's she? Suddenly, a very pretty woman in some very expensive-looking but old fashioned clothes appeared before me...

EMMA HAMILTON: I'm Horatio's beloved! That's who I am! We're not married, but we love each other!

(Gilbert 2017: 72)

What is important here is the tone, which is fast-paced and flippant at times, but rooted in some historical fact. The fictional T. believes she is right to cure Nelson, but discovers she is vilified by the national hero and all his male companions for saving his life, who realise the maritime hero will not enjoy iconic status if he is saved at Trafalgar. The character of the Time Devil acts as both a character and also a source of questionable historical information when he says: "Ha, ha, ha! You have no idea how much you've messed up the history books T.!" His mocking laughter is typical of the attitude he takes throughout the text: like Hughes' *Crow* (1995) he is mercilessly cynical, revelling in mistakes, hubris and violence.

As a writer, I found creating counter-factual scenes like this liberating. By attempting to engage my teenage audience I felt much freer to play with real events in a way that I would not have done if I was writing a literary historical novel.

The scene is not deeply crafted in that there is little subtext; everything is spelled out clearly. This was because the audience needed to quickly gain a sense of history being altered. Using counter-factuals meant I couldn't be wrong: I was dealing with what might have been, not what happened.

## The Barge, multimodality and the Butterfly Effect: promoting discussion

Prince Frederick's Barge is one of the NMM's most spectacular exhibits: an oared barge, painted gold, built in 1732, for the eldest son of George III. It was a craft used for peaceful processions on the Thames and conveys a strong sense of regality and power.

In the fictional script, C. was sent back in time to April 1736 and found himself on the barge. The Time Devil gave him a gun of that era and told him that his people, the Dutch – the “real” C. is of Dutch heritage -- would greatly benefit if he shot Prince Frederick. A “butterfly” effect would happen whereby the British Empire would not be so powerful and the Dutch Empire would rise (and not fall as it did) to eminence. Incensed by the Time Devil's biased account of history, C. shoots the Prince, and finds himself being shot at by the Prince's family and guards.

I found that I was learning and growing as a writer as I worked multimodally here. The resource of the Barge and reading the historical documents about it inspired me to adopt a new writerly persona – a deliberately provocative one. I used the aforementioned “expert intuition” (Barnard 2019: 81) to allow myself the freedom to imagine Prince Frederick being shot (which did not happen in real life) and the consequences of it; my “inner auteur” (81) was at play here,

bringing together a “disparate range of sensations and events” (81) in this creative project.

## **Findings**

So, to return to my original research question:

*How can I improve my writing and teaching for a very specific audience – 11–13-year-old school children -- by being multimodal?*

At the heart of my development as a writer was the process of “remediation” (Barnard 2017). This was an ongoing journey, which occurred throughout: I was constantly taking texts from certain modes and re-writing them so that they would work in other forms and genres. I re-wrote dry textbook explanations of Reciprocal Teaching as dynamic, entertaining scripts; I created stories out of museum artefacts; I moulded a new time-travelling fantasy out of my knowledge of science fiction films and TV programmes; I adapted concepts from video games and used them to make my narrative more entertaining and internally consistent. As a result of this research, I can see how being aware of the remediation process will only help me learn and grow as a writer. The concept opens the door upon what is really happening when writers work multimodally; it provides a vital reflective tool for understanding and developing one’s practice.

I also improved my teaching and writing by taking steps to avoid multimodal overload. I did this by providing autonomy to the participants involved so that they co-created the story with me. But this autonomy would not have helped me develop as a writer if I had not worked out meaningful constraints with my co-creators. This was most strikingly illustrated by requiring our six chosen pupils

to choose six objects in the museum; such an activity provided both autonomy and meaningful constraints upon our multimodal approach.

The concept of reciprocity was also vital in honing my skills as a writer and teacher. Having a sustained reciprocal relationship with the participants meant that I became increasingly confident in writing for a specific audience – the pupils at X. I was able to constantly clarify and reflect upon my purposes which included entertaining, motivating and educating. Discussing things with all the participants meant I learnt to hone my creative writing so that it was clear and comprehensible. Listening deeply to all the participants made me much more aware of:

- my audience’s interests and sensitivities
- how to structure the story in a suspenseful way;
- how to use language in a more consistent fashion so that the identity of the script was maintained despite the code switching that happened in it;
- the absolute necessity to engage my readers at all times by drastically pruning the whole script of unnecessary information and providing sharp, impactful, shocking endings to the scenes
- making my fictional world consistent and plausible despite its fantastical elements

Working in this way helped me develop my “expert intuition” and “inner auteur” (Barnard 2019: 81): the more I listened and shared my work, the more I was able to bring my skill-set as a writer to the text and chosen audience.

The creative writers on the MA programme saw the possibilities of working with schools and the cultural sector. One of the writers went on to write her own script, partly inspired by observing this project. She told me that she was emboldened to have a go at writing a historical musical by me: “You just went for it, and I thought, hey, why don’t I do that? Instead of agonising about whether it will be any good, I’ll just sit down and write it!”

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