Similarities between good teaching and good public education writing

Guidance for writers sharing Earth Law through blogging and social media

by Helen George

In teaching, less is more

When a teacher plans a lesson they make a list of what they want the students to learn. Good teachers try not to overwhelm the students with too many new facts. They understand that the human brain is not a bottomless bucket!

Compare these teaching plans for English language lessons. The students have never spoken English before. They are complete beginners. Which lesson plan do you think is better for them?

Mr Carey’s plan for a lesson of one hour

- Numbers 1 to 20
- Colours of the rainbow
- Names of geographical features
- Names of animals

Mr Peter’s plan for a lesson of one hour

- Colours: green, yellow and blue
- Words: grass, sun and sky
- Conversation practice: What colour is the grass/sun/sky? The grass/sun/sky is green/yellow/blue.

Mr Carey introduces the students to over 40 new items of vocabulary in one hour. The students are likely to feel very overwhelmed and stressed. Will they remember a single word?

Meanwhile, in Mr Peter’s classroom they’re having a more relaxed time. It’s likely many will remember at least 50% of the vocabulary. Mr Peter teaches just a handful of words and encourages the students to use them.

Mr Peter shares less content but the students learn more. Ironic isn’t it?

He also cements their learning by teaching the students to use the words in speech. He enables the students to own their new knowledge.

A good teacher understands that students need to take possession of new information. Do you remember the first time you heard that humans breathe oxygen, that ice is frozen water, and that trees have growth rings? In the past somebody gifted you that knowledge. Now it is yours. It is a part of your mind. You own it.
Our aim as Earth Law public education writers is to be good teachers. We want to gift legal and environmental information to our readers. We want our readers to take ownership of Earth Law knowledge.

To achieve these goals we avoid overwhelming our readers with information. We gift them with knowledge that they can make use of.

The desired outcomes of public education writing

- The readers can remember most of what they have read.
- The readers are able to use their new knowledge to inform their future activities.
- The readers are able to build on their new knowledge and develop new ideas.

**Write like a teacher, not a student**

Passionate and immersive writing experiences help us to improve our understanding of our chosen subjects. As a student I felt I didn’t know a topic until I’d enjoyed writing an essay about it. For me, writing was a very personal activity. My growth was my primary motivation.

Back then, I assumed that all writing experiences were immersive and full of feeling! I supposed that even writing a university lecture was a personal journey.

Of course, professors have to write in a very practical and pragmatic way. They can’t think about themselves. They have to ensure that their content is up-to-date, suitable for students, and in tune with the department’s course syllabus and exam requirements.

Writing for others is very different to writing for ourselves.
Motivations when writing as a learner

- My enjoyment
- My knowledge
- My development

Motivations when writing as a teacher

- My readers’ enjoyment
- My readers’ needs
- My readers’ development

Earth Law public education writers should write as teachers. We have to think about the needs of our readers, our organisations, Earth Law, and the environment. We write for the public good.

Some considerations for public education writers

- What do I need to teach?
- How must I write if I want to ensure that readers learn from my writing?
- What are the requirements of my organisation or publisher?
- Is my content reliable and accurate?
Making a human connection without being too personal

At your school was there a teacher who chatted too much about their weekend? Sooner or later we all encounter a teacher who overshares personal information. Most are well intentioned. They want to appear approachable and to connect with the students.

For similar reasons, oversharing afflicts many public education writers. It's an easy mistake to make. Unfortunately it weakens and dilutes our teaching efforts. How do we avoid oversharing yet maintain an approachable tone in our writing?

Three teachers are talking about Wales. Compare their statements. Which do you prefer?

Mx Jones:

“Wales is a principality in the United Kingdom. The area is mountainous and known for sheep farming.”

Dr Smith:

“Wales is a principality in the United Kingdom. I went there with my wife on holiday and we had screaming rows the whole week and then she left me. I’ve been alone ever since. I tried internet dating but it hasn’t worked out.”

Dr Brown:

“Wales is a principality in the United Kingdom. I went there on holiday once. The Snowdonia national park is strikingly beautiful and I enjoyed seeing the birds of prey.”

Jones is a talking Wikipedia entry. There is nothing to excite the imagination in Jones’s statement. That’s a pity. Stimulating the imagination helps students to learn.

Smith is way too personal. The students might enjoy hearing about a teacher's problems but will they remember anything about Wales after the lesson? There is too much focus on Smith as a human being.

Brown keeps the focus on Wales. Brown shares minimal personal information but says enough to give the students a chance to imagine the human experience of visiting Wales.

Brown shows how to humanise content without oversharing personal information. Writers can use the same technique to add colour and interest to their writing.

The technique is to only share personal information that is a common, shared part of human experience. Brown described going on holiday. Millions go on holiday every year.
Weaving in common human experiences (such as travelling) can transform dry writing into a human interest story that is not too focused on the writer.

Compare the following two passages about a visit to a lake. Which one connects with you in a human way? Which reads like a dry textbook?

“The lake is situated 60 miles outside the region’s administrative centre. The waters are home to 14 freshwater fish species and a variety of rare plants. The lake eagle nests on an island in the centre.”

“We set out from the capital early one morning in the rainy season and travelled four hours by car to the lake. The 60 mile journey took so long because the roads were flooded and muddy. My guide Sheila led me along the shoreline. ‘Careful you don’t slip,’ she said in her soft local accent. We struggled along for twenty minutes in the icy rain, which dribbled down the neck of my coat. I was exhausted by the time we rounded a corner on the shoreline. ‘Look,’ said Sheila. And we saw, there on a small island, bathed in a ray of sunlight, the eagle’s nest.”

Like Brown, the writer of the second passage shares no real personal information. Everything the writer says is a common part of many people’s experiences. Most of us have travelled long distances, have been drenched by rain, have struggled on slippery surfaces, and have seen or felt rays of sunlight. Most of us have followed a guide or heard accents unlike our own.

By highlighting these common features of human experience, the writer has produced a statement that connects the educational content with the readers’ own memories. The lake seems more interesting to readers because of this technique.

When communicating about nature in blogs or on social media we can make our words relatable by sharing experiences that are common to many. We can, without sharing any real information about ourselves, humanise our writing and reach out with a “friendly” voice to our readers. The secret, of course, is to appreciate the difference between confessional and educational writing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>This is confessional writing</th>
<th>This is educational writing</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On my fifth visit to hospital for a chest infection that I couldn’t shift, I noticed that patients benefitted from watching nature in the beautiful hospital garden.</td>
<td>On a visit to hospital I noticed that patients benefitted from watching nature in the beautiful hospital garden.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’d always wanted to be Italian so I made sure to visit the Dolomites every summer. I felt sure that I would become Italian eventually, simply by absorbing the beauty of the mountainscape.</td>
<td>I was a regular summer visitor to the Dolomites, a beautiful mountain range in Italy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sight of the deer calmed me down. I’d always been nervous in the forest, ever since watching The Blair Witch Project.</td>
<td>The deer gently stepped through the forest. I noted her aura of calm.</td>
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