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**A critical investigation into how Year 8 students' learning
about 'travel writing' can be developed
through films and photographs**

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Abstract

'Travel writing' is a popular topic to teach to Key Stage Three English classes, and yet it is surprisingly under-represented in recent research literature. This report identifies three main reasons that the genre can prove challenging to teach and challenging to approach as a young student, and investigates the efficacy of using still and moving images to provide a stimulus for this particular, slippery type of creative writing. My research explores whether the first of these problems could be addressed by supplying some sort of 'experience' of travel through still and moving images, to students with an otherwise limited experience of the types of places that are typically subjects of 'travel writing'. I conclude that there remains more investigation to be done on both the teaching of travel writing and the use of still and moving images as stimuli for creative writing in schools.

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Introduction

This report will consider how students' learning about 'travel writing' could be developed through the use of film and photographic visual stimuli. My very small-scale study drew upon elements of action research, and comprised two short cycles of lessons.

I chose to explore the use of visual stimuli to inspire creative writing because I was interested in the complications necessarily arising from teaching a 'travel writing' unit to twelve year olds. I felt teaching 'travel writing' to very young adults presented real challenges for three main reasons. Firstly, because the genre relies on personal contact with unknown places, which may or may not have been experienced by the students themselves. Secondly, because the texts that are often classified as 'travel writing' are many and diverse. Finally, I was interested in the fact that the 'creative non-fiction' genre that so often characterises such writing is difficult to define, and, straddling two often contrasting writing styles, challenging to approach from a teaching perspective.

I wished to explore ways to make the often alien and slippery genre into an accessible mode of writing for the class. I felt that by using video and still images to make the potentially very distant subject matter a reality in the classroom, students might be able to access certain experiences which they could draw upon as they began to experiment with their creative writing.

Contextualising the class

I had been working with this Year 8, mid-ability class since starting my second teaching placement at a rural, 11-18 comprehensive school in Essex, with a largely mono-cultural student body, few EAL (English as an Additional Language) students and a low proportion of cared-for students and students from low-income backgrounds. There are 34 students in the class and the group work together well. They are a very dynamic and lively group. The classroom atmosphere is energetic

and students are respectful of their peers' work, offering ready praise and habitually volunteering to read examples of their own work to the class. The students enjoy drama and oral work, which are great strengths of the group as a whole. However, while full of imaginative ideas, their written work is often technically inaccurate and they lack confidence in articulating their ideas in writing, resulting in a general reluctance to approach writing tasks.

Prior to the 'travel writing' unit of work, students had been taught a 'media' unit, focussing on the interpretation of still and moving adverts. The assessment for the unit of work immediately preceding the 'travel writing' was a piece of creative writing about World War One, inspired by a clip from a film called 'Over The Top' after six weeks' work on Michael Morpurgo's novel 'Private Peaceful'. The students were therefore familiar with ways to interpret still and moving images, and with the skills associated with descriptive writing.

Outline of the teaching sequence

My aims with the series of lessons using still and moving images were to provide students with the necessary experience of unfamiliar people and places to inform their 'travel writing'; and to encourage them to interpret 'place' in a creative, multi-sensory way, rather than as simply a superficial, visual experience.

The English department's 'travel writing' scheme of work seemed to me to miss the crucial generic specificities of the writing it purported to teach, so I was eager to adapt it to emphasise the particularities of the genre. I therefore negated the first half of the scheme, which focussed on brochures and adverts; to my mind, this was not 'travel writing' at its best, nor particularly helpful for a unit of work on descriptive writing.

I planned for a half-term of lessons in partnership with the class teacher, to cover writing skills such as close analysis, writing dialogue and expanding students' vocabulary; and specific generic concepts such as changing perspectives, autobiography and subjectivity, explored through well-written, entertaining examples of travel texts. The design of the sequence was guided by the fact that students were required to complete a 'Letter of Complaint' piece of formative assessment half-way through the scheme. Persuasive letter writing seemed to me a dubious means of assessing their understanding of 'travel writing'. However, it was perhaps a useful way of assessing how far students had begun to sharpen their writing skills through the 'travel writing' scheme.

I designed the sequence to make imagery central to all lessons: all began with a still image or film clip stimulus, and the students' first homework was to find their own 'holiday snap' (real or fantasy) to stick into their books, to refer back to during the scheme. Within the sequence, I focussed five lessons specifically on using video and still image stimuli, which form the basis of my research analysis. During the first cycle of three lessons, students watched a video as a whole class, in the next lesson worked in a small group, and in the third, in pairs; in the second cycle, students used still images to inspire whole class discussion, then did some group-work on image interpretation, and in a subsequent lesson used still images to inspire their own piece of creative 'travel writing'.

Literature Review

Research on school-based 'travel writing' is relatively scarce and as such I focussed my reading on the three main areas I felt were most pertinent to teaching this genre. Beginning with an overview of research into teaching 'writing' generally at Key Stage Three (Years 7-9), I next focus on the question of student autobiography, something I consider pertinent to any classroom writing, but particularly to this idiosyncratic genre. The final part of my review considers research into the use of still and moving images in the classroom, which puts these theories about writing into practice in the classroom.

Writing at Key Stage Three

In 'Learning to Teach English in the Secondary School', John Moss (2009) focusses in his 'Writing' chapter on approaching genre in the English curriculum and developing students' work by 'scaffolding' their writing in unfamiliar genres. In his recommendation to trainee English teachers, Moss suggests practical approaches to the exploration of genre in the classroom, advising us to address questions such as: "how familiar are pupils with the conventions of the genre(s)?" and "what examples/models can be used to reinforce pupil familiarity with the genre(s)?" (p.149). Moss identifies the importance of collaborative teacher and student learning, using Vygotskian theory to "help pupils to attain the next stage of development on the road to independent writing" (p.154).

Moss' experience as Dean of Canterbury Christ Church University's Faculty of Education and the nature of the handbook for which his chapter was written means that his discussion of writing in the

secondary English classroom is of a theoretical, yet pragmatic nature. The chapter is interspersed with suggestions for activities to implement educational theories in practice; Moss makes frequent links between his suggestions and the design of the 2004 National Curriculum. The changes coming into effect in 2014 will not necessarily discount Moss' suggestions, since the call for "a wide coverage of genres" in the new guidelines (DfE, 2013, p.4) and the non-specific nature of the framework theoretically allows for 'travel writing', with its unusual generic features, to serve an interesting and useful purpose at Key Stage Three.

Deborah Myhill and Teresa Cremin (2012) have gathered first-hand accounts from professional writers working in schools. By their nature, therefore, their discussions are less school-oriented, and more ideological, than Moss'. The author Philip Gross suggests an interesting paradox which has potentially significant implications for my Year 8 class: that, while much drafting may take place in the 'exterior' environment of collaborative class discussion, the writing space may often also be "an interior experience, invisible from outside" (ibid., p.163). He suggests that "this might be increasingly urgent and rare for young writers who live in an extrovert, performative, Facebookish world" (ibid.). The notion hints towards the idea that students in 2014 are in some way restricted in their freedom to create by the very tools that might, in other circumstances, offer creative possibilities for inspiration (by print media, the internet, the connection of ideas and transmission of information at unprecedented speeds). The idea is of particular concern to any teacher entering the profession now; these new technologies are now being implemented in classrooms increasingly frequently.

In the same chapter, writer Mary Medicott also emphasises the need to relish the drafting process, explaining that teachers risk ignoring "the rich panoply of associated storytelling techniques - visualisation, image-sharing, questioning, story-boarding" if they fail to allow their students time to first "dig over the ground" of their ideas (ibid., p.166). Linda Newbery, another writer, describes the process of writing as "a gathering of ingredients": "postcards, cuttings from newspapers, sayings, poems, pieces of music, and sometimes specific items like marbles" (ibid., p.167). That all three of these professional writers stress the centrality of the drafting process in classroom writing – and that two expressly emphasise visual approaches to drafting – suggests that students can benefit from recognising the relationship between visual narrative and written narrative when creating their own work.

In his article, Ian Thompson (2012) applies Vygotsky's 'Zone of Proximal Development' (ZPD) to the writing work he was carrying out with his Year 9, comprehensive school class. Thompson's action research looks into the impact of inspiring reluctant writers to engage with creative writing tasks through a collaborative drafting process, and emphasises an interest in making the writing classroom into a cultural space. Although at an inner-city school, and a year older, his subjects, like my own class, were Key Stage Three students. The notion of a shared and co-built communal social space for writing seems particularly pertinent to 'travel writing', since students' own cultural and social experiences (or a lack thereof) and understanding are likely to have a significant influence on the writing produced in this genre.

Thompson focusses on Vygotsky's conceit that "the teaching of writing has to be based on the interests of the child, be 'relevant to life', meaningful for children and taught naturally rather than mechanically" (Thompson, 2012, p.89). He explains that in his experience "the most successful writing by previously reluctant pupils occurs when the task allows the pupils to build on their own past histories" (p.90). This emphasis on the importance of autobiography, although based in anecdotal evidence, suggests that self-chosen subject matter is highly important for school-based writing. Thompson's concern is the subject of much research, some of which is discussed under the 'student autobiography' sub-heading below.

Thompson explains that "collaboration" goes beyond teacher and student partnership, and "can also include artefacts, such as books, videos, wall displays..." (p.91). Thompson's suggested stimuli, a combination of still and moving images, corroborate my own ideas about making the classroom into a space in which all students, regardless of their actual travelling experience, can participate in some idea of 'place' and 'otherness'.

The importance of student autobiography

Peter Medway suggests that writing could be a powerful means of penetrating the world and what happens in it, but in the classroom as he knew it in 1988, students were not often given the chance to use writing to this end (Medway, 1988). In his wide-scale analysis of 351 12-year-olds' writing assignments, Medway identified three broad categories of tasks commonly set in the classroom: those "significant only for having no particular significance"; "those with 'conventional significance' (such as Christmas) and those of "particular personal significance for the individual writer" (p.28). In doing so, he identifies areas that have been traditionally under-exploited in the

teaching of writing: “the social life of the locality [...] leisure sites, places of congregation, the good and bad fortunes of the people around, memorable incidents and bizarre scenes” (p.28). Medway contends that students’ engagement with the real world has been under-estimated and that “the social world is something in which they are deeply interested”; that engaging students in “social settings [...] would [...] bring in all those performative aspects of language neglected in ‘spectator role’ activities” (p.34).

I would argue that ‘travel writing’ is a potentially rich way for students to explore the very areas that Medway identifies as lacking in school-based writing, such as the emotional encounters with place, since the core of much travel writing is formed from an engagement with locality, the people around, and anecdotes of “memorable incidents and bizarre scenes”. The ‘creative non-fiction’ genre could act as a fruitful means of connecting the potentially conflicting writing demands of real-world subject matter and creative, original description.

Judith Graham is also concerned to exploit students’ engagement with the real world, making suggestions for teaching writing in the classroom based on the conceit that teachers ought to capitalise upon – not ignore– “the power of narrative”, “children’s interest in the ‘real’ world”, and “children’s visual competence” (Graham, 1996, p.19). Graham proposes the gap between non-fiction and fiction has been exaggerated by the organisation of writing in the classroom into distinct categories, and instead proposes that students work from non-fiction picture books to understand more about a fictional place which is hedged with realistic boundaries. This notion of bringing reality to bear on the creation of an imaginary place seems to me directly applicable to the teaching of ‘travel writing’ in schools.

Graham was writing in 1996, when advances in technology seemed to present exciting new opportunities for teachers of narrative: “the age we live in is full of visual representations [...] Children are very visually stimulated and attentive”. Graham suggests that “we can harness that expertise in school” (p.18). Writing in 2014, the developments that Graham identifies have evolved and multiplied unimaginably: we now live in undeniably visual times. The growth of the internet and the availability of cheap cameras, powerful tablet technology and digital and online television renders Graham’s call for image-led learning almost absurd; images are so much a part of children’s everyday lives that their visual literacy is advanced far beyond that of many adults. The challenge

facing teachers now is to bring this visual experience to bear on work in the classroom, and to make work in the classroom apply to the visual world beyond it.

Gill Anderson's 2013 reflection on her original 'The Island' scheme of work offers pertinent criticisms about the teaching of writing in general which are particularly applicable for writing about an imagined destination. The ignored centrality of students' investment in their created worlds, and the lamentable disconnection between the imagined world, the world of the classroom and the real world beyond it form the basis of Anderson's criticism about the way creative writing can be taught in schools.

Anderson's critique echoes Graham's concerns: she says that her original scheme used non-fiction writing to build up students' understandings and experiences of place before writing about it creatively, explaining that students should be given "references to and extracts from texts giving *information* about the climate, flora and fauna (potential food supplies!) on islands in different regions of the world – as well as from diaries of real life adventurers and explorers." She explains that "the assumption in the original materials is that *content* and *context* are both important for the construction of writing" (Anderson, 2013, p.119).

In her article, Anderson criticises a student teacher for attempting to provide such 'context' by showing "a short YouTube clip" of a "generic tropical island" and passing around photocopied photographs of generic islands "with no discussion, as 'inspiration' for the writing" (p.116), bluntly dismissing her efforts. Anderson's proposals for successfully bringing reality to bear on imagination made me conscious to ensure that, when planning my own scheme, I built in time for students to explore places as more than postcard images, and see them as living facts.

Using still and moving image in the classroom

Andrew Goodwyn, in the Preface to his book, says that "teachers of English have always been very clear about engaging with the real lives of their pupils without allowing the grim nature of much of reality to constrain them from the exploration of our emotional and aesthetic lives" (Goodwyn, 2004, p.1). An optimistic generalisation, Goodwyn's claim nevertheless fits into the broad trend of researchers emphasising the importance of relating the real-world to the English classroom.

Goodwyn says the moving image “plays an absolutely central role in the lives of young people” and that “it is a genuinely exciting time [for English teaching]” (p.10). It is interesting to consider his ideas after Judith Graham’s, comparing his viewpoint on the “current and future pupils in English classrooms” who “come, in the majority, from media-saturated homes” (p.16) with the students Graham was describing in 1996. Goodwyn proposes the centrality of the moving image media to students’ lives and the importance of engaging with students’ lives; in doing so he suggests that the English teacher who does not make use of students’ moving image media literacy is not properly doing their job.

In Chapter Four, Goodwyn makes interesting observations about documentary as a ‘hybrid’ medium which confuses ‘reality’ with reality; a complex form that is in part representative of the real world but is also partly subjective due to its autobiographical nature (p.70). This tension between the real world and a presentation of the ‘real world’ seems pertinent to the idea of ‘travel writing’, since much of the writing students might encounter is grounded in real experiences but is also written in ways that might align it closely with genres which are more often associated with fiction writing. Often incorporating humour, anecdote and exaggeration, much ‘travel writing’ contains strong elements of ‘descriptive writing’ or ‘creative writing’ with which students may feel more familiar.

Sylvia Pantaleo’s classroom-based research into Grade 7 students’ interpretation of graphic novels draws conclusions about multi-modality which have interesting implications for teaching ‘travel writing’ at Key Stage Three (Grade 7 students are 12-13 years old, as are Year 8 students). Although Pantaleo’s research was undertaken in Canada, and although she is primarily interested in measuring students’ ability to interpret graphic novels, in a secondary sense her work concerns students’ learning about visual literacy and their application of this knowledge to “their subsequent creation of their own print texts”; an aim which we share in our research designs (Pantaleo, 2011, p.113).

In her conclusions, Pantaleo suggests that “we can also help students to become more literate with a wide range of multimodal texts” (p.127). The multi-modal aspect of ‘travel writing’ texts was something I wanted to explicitly address with my Year 8 class, as a way of encouraging them to see what was their third consecutive ‘Writing Unit’ in their English course as distinct from their previous work on ‘poetry’ and ‘novels’. Pantaleo’s emphasis here is on understanding image as a

mode of narrative, rather than as a means of drafting for a written end. Like Goodwyn and Graham, Pantaleo alludes to students' exposure to multi-modality beyond the classroom and ways in which teachers might utilise their students' ability to engage with sophisticated modes of writing: "students are immersed in a plurality of multimodal texts that feature sophisticated structures, designs and visual representations" (p.127). Written in 2011, Pantaleo's conclusions are drawn seven years later than Goodwyn's, a significant length of time in a period of rapid technological advance and availability. Her ideas about the place of image in the English classroom, therefore, might offer an updated evaluation about the role of the moving image in classrooms.

Amy Newsham's report (2012) on her use of cameras in the classroom with her Year 7 class describes a workshop day spent using visual stimuli to inspire writing. Newsham's creative approach was informed by her ideological stance on the function of creative writing in the classroom: the idea that "the process should enable students to visit and explore a brand new idea, being or world" (p.33). Her outlook here seems to match with Medway's, and my feeling that 'travel writing' in particular could offer students the chance to escape their immediate reality by understanding alternate realities from which they are in some way removed.

In her small-scale experience Newsham found that her "normally" disengaged students were "hooked!" by the graphic novels she was using (p.33). For her particular students, the visual approach to narrative was an effective means of motivating them to work where other approaches had been less successful. Students were invited to write a story about "a place no one has ever been to before" (p.34), using image as a means of broadening thinking to consider different perspectives on place – a concern at the core of 'travel writing', and one which I wanted to investigate with my own group of students.

Newsham's success criteria for the writing workshop were "enjoyment and engagement" (p.35), rather than academic achievement. This, in combination with a lack of formal data collection beyond her own emotionally invested observations, makes her qualitative findings very specific to her particular experience. What she finds, however, does seem to fit into a wider pattern of findings by other researchers: that writing can be made accessible to usually reluctant writers through the use of image. Having attended Newsham's UKLA workshop (March 2014), based on her visual stimuli classroom research, I can testify to the apparent effectiveness of her strategies. What the workshop

offered, which her report does not, was the chance to see the most interesting outcomes of her strategy: students' writing.

James Carter's suggestions for teaching creative writing are not based in formal research either, but form a collection of ideas for use in the classroom which have been tested and modified through writing workshops in collaboration with classroom teachers. In Carter's experience, students do not function as "endless wells of creativity" (Carter, 2002, p.1) and need varied stimulation.

Carter suggests that "images are like frozen moments from stories" which we can use to "create our own version of a whole new story" (p.81). His position on the usefulness of imagery for story-telling is informed by his own practice as a writer and his affinity to other writers such as Michael Morpurgo, a personal friend. Carter's success in using images in writing workshops with students leads him to the conclusion that "as we view images, they arouse our curiosity and can lead us to consider what is taking place and to imagine such things as who the characters in the picture are, or when and where the setting is, or what has led up to this event or what will happen next" (p.81). While Carter's generalisations are perhaps unscientific and optimistic, the notion that using images to inspire creative writing appeals to an innate human curiosity to fulfil incomplete narratives is nevertheless appealing to a teacher facing students whose visual literacy is generally sophisticated, but whose verbal literacy requires development.

Colette Higgins' (2002) case study on four Year 6 boys' engagement with a video stimulus again focusses on the idea that narrative is now (and was then) very much multi-modal and that, for teachers of reluctant writers, students' engagement with this type of narrative is crucial to notice. More specifically, Higgins says she "was interested to find from our discussions that boys often draw ideas for stories from television, video and computer games as well as from reading. Boys who rarely read outside school said they mostly used ideas and themes from these media for narrative composition" (p.27).

Higgins' conclusion that "it is evident that using a film text can and does bring an added dimension to writing lessons" (p.35), when considered alongside Goodwyn's, Graham's and Pantaleo's, suggests a consensus among contemporary researchers that media and technology now exert a tangible impression upon students' writing in the classroom. To ignore this as a practitioner, therefore, would be to the detriment of students' learning. If teachers of English are to engage meaningfully with their students' lives beyond the classroom, the influence of established and

emerging media on the creation of narrative in the 21st century has to be acknowledged when designing schemes of work which explicitly address story-telling and story-making.

Research questions

Having considered a range of views on teaching writing and approaches to unfamiliar genres, I developed my research questions to focus on the differences between students' responses to the still and moving image stimuli during the sequence of lessons and to probe further the question of personal experience when writing about travel. They are thus as follows:

How is students' learning about 'travel writing' influenced by watching videos of unknown places?

How is students' learning about 'travel writing' influenced by looking at photographs of unknown places?

How far do students' own experiences matter when writing creatively about travel?

Ethical issues

Before starting my research, I completed an ethics checklist considering the ethical concerns that could arise from the project, and sought permission from the school regarding the collection of data. I planned my lessons alongside the class teacher to make sure that my methods would not disadvantage the class against their peers who were being taught to the department's original scheme. I ensured that all students in the class were aware of the process, in accordance with BERA's guidelines, and where students were taken out of the ordinary classroom context, they were given a 'consent form' which outlined my intentions and emphasised the confidential and non-obligatory nature of their participation. This meant that all participants in my research took part in a condition of "voluntary informed consent" (BERA, 2011, p.5).

Methodology and research methods

I used methods drawn from action research because of its potentially "democratizing" nature and the advantages concerning "continuity" (Denscombe, 2007, p.134). I felt action research was best

suited to a large class with a collaborative and coherent identity, and that by using action research I could better gauge a more holistic overview of the learning across the unit, which was important since I was adapting and teaching the entire scheme of work.

I issued a questionnaire prior to the initial teaching sequence to assess students' existing ideas about still and moving image (see Appendix 1). 33 students were given the questionnaire to complete in class. I explained the questions to address misunderstandings, emphasised the anonymous nature of the task and stressed the importance of personal response. I made every effort "to keep the questionnaire as brief as possible", combining open and closed questions to ensure that students were less likely to fall into a "pattern of answers" (Denscombe, 2007, p.162). I designed the tick-box question to keep the number of questions to a minimum while gathering a detailed impression of students' ideas about still and moving images.

I attempted to create classroom conditions to elicit reliable responses, but there were flaws in having the students respond in class. Some conferred before responding, which might have influenced their answers, while others asked multiple questions about what they 'could' write before articulating their responses, which may have tempered their initial ideas. I think responses are "as full and honest as they can be" and fairly representative of students' views, but am aware they may not paint an entirely accurate picture of their ideas (Taber, 2007, p.168).

Students were given another questionnaire to complete just before they wrote their final 'travel writing' assessments (see Appendix 2). I used a similar format and again emphasised the importance of anonymity and private, personal response. Unfortunately, however, I was only able to gather 16 responses, as 18 students were on a Geography field trip during the lesson in which it was distributed. Due to time constraints, students completed this questionnaire for homework; as such, the conditions under which they answered my questions were beyond my control and might have varied significantly from the first occasion. The smaller sample size for the second questionnaire limits the extent to which it is possible to speculate on the whole class' feelings toward the teaching of the unit and makes it more difficult to track the development of the whole class' learning. However, when triangulated with my other research methods, responses to the 'open-questions' from the second batch of questionnaires do offer some useful insights into students' learning about 'travel writing', with the similar results deriving from these similar research methods implying a level of accuracy and authenticity in the findings (Taber, 2007, p.136).

I have not analysed the students' formative 'letter of complaint' work, since I believe their other learner products provide more useful evidence of their thinking about 'travel writing'. Their other work focussed on: varied sensory description; the ability to empathise with people from other places; and varying writing about place by moving from 'panoramic' description to detailed 'close-up'. The final written outcome of the unit, a 'piece of travel writing' done under timed conditions, is perhaps the most comprehensive learner product evidence I have gathered about students' understanding of 'travel writing'; but written work in their drafting books and on their planning sheets gives perhaps a more valuable – and more representative – impression of the course of their learning across the two cycles of lessons (Myhill & Cremin, 2012).

I carried out two group interviews with students from the class in order to gather a deeper understanding of students' opinions on the work: one after the initial cycle of lessons, and one after the second cycle, after students had planned their assessment but before they had written it. I selected the first interview group on the basis that they had the confidence to discuss their opinions, and would not suffer academically for missing the initial ten minutes of a lesson. I chose seven students – four boys and three girls. All students read and agreed to the terms of a consent form (Denscombe, 2007) (see Appendix 3). The second interview, like the second questionnaire, was influenced by the absence of students who were on the Geography trip. As such, I chose students from a reduced pool of volunteers – a pool reduced further by the fact that this interview was to be conducted at break time, due to time constraints. Six students eventually volunteered: two boys and four girls, three of whom had taken part in the first interview. It is undoubtable that "the interviewer effect" will have influenced students' responses during the interview (they see me primarily as their student teacher); while my "personal attributes" could not be changed, I did make every effort to create "the right climate" so that students would feel comfortable to answer honestly (Taber, 2007, p.185).

Data presentation and analysis

Responses to the initial questionnaire (see Appendix 1) suggested that, in a general sense, the vast majority of students preferred 'TV' or 'film' to 'photographs' or 'illustrations, drawings or paintings' (see Table 1). 19 students 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with the statement 'looking at pictures inspires me when I am doing creative writing', while 27 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with the statement that 'watching films or clips or documentaries inspires me when I am doing creative

writing’ (see Table 2). These statistics appear to suggest that, initially, these students felt more comfortable both generally and academically with film media than still image media.

TV	Film	Photographs	Illustrations, drawings or paintings
3	28	1	1

Table 1: students’ responses to the question ‘Which of the following do you prefer? Tick one box.’

	I strongly disagree	I disagree	I don’t know	I agree	I strongly agree	Total responses
‘Looking at pictures helps me understand ideas and themes in novels and poems’	0	0	15	11	4	30
‘Looking at pictures inspires me when I am doing creative writing’	0	2	12	12	7	33
‘Watching films or clips or documentaries helps me understand ideas and themes in novels and poems’	0	0	3	12	17	32
‘Watching films or clips or documentaries inspires me when I am doing creative writing’	0	1	5	14	13	33
‘I enjoy working from images when I do creative writing’	0	5	7	15	5	32

Table 2: students’ responses to the question ‘Read the statements below. Rate how strongly you agree with each statement by ticking the box that best fits your views. Only tick one box in each row.’

Students’ initial feelings towards creative writing in school were generally positive, often focussing on the potential for personal expression that the mode allowed. Responses included: “I enjoy creative writing because it lets me express my emotions” and “I like it because it gives us a chance to be creative and not being told what to write”. There were, however, suggestions that this freedom was not universally enjoyed, with some answers implying anxiety about or plain dislike for this type of work: “if I don’t like it I don’t write well”; and, quite simply, “I hate it”.

The first half of the teaching sequence was designed to answer my first research question, **‘how is students’ learning about ‘travel writing’ influenced by watching videos of unknown places?’**

Qualitative data I gathered suggests that many students were able to use moving image footage of unknown places as substitutes for actual ‘visits’ to the locations (Antarctica, Tobago and the Sahara desert); and that, to a degree, the video footage ‘recreated’ the places in the classroom in enough detail that students could imagine how it might feel to be there.

Some were able to use their own visual experiences of place to generate empathetic responses for other people who might live in or visit unknown places, as well as genuine curiosity about an unfamiliar country. During the cycle’s first lesson, students watched a 10-minute video from the Guardian Travel webpage, documenting a journalist’s personal journey back to her home country, Tobago. One male student’s (unedited) work reads:

I would feel quite proud and grateful that I’m going to Tobago, because it has it’s own culture such as music and food [...] Also the history of Tobago makes you want to know how it became such a beautiful dream destination.

This student demonstrates the ability to combine imagination (‘I feel...’) with observation (‘it has it’s own culture...’), a key aspect of the complex generic demands of ‘travel writing’.

More than this ability to *imagine* relocation, one student’s response to ‘How do you think Maya was feeling?’ might even suggest that watching the film was so direct an experience that this student actually felt transported to the island. Instead of writing ‘there’ (i.e. Tobago), the student repeatedly uses a pronoun that suggests that he is writing from beyond the classroom: “I think she felt excited and overwhelmed to be back here and have family here.”

In the second lesson in the first cycle, students watched a short video clip called ‘Postcard from Antarctica’ from the Guardian website, which featured music but no voiceover. Their written work suggests that some students were able to generate empathetic responses without the addition of any factual information beyond the moving images. One student’s work reads:

Gladly, I am feeling relaxed in this new, stunning country. I am freezing from all the snow and ice which seems to never end. However, I am super excited to watch the adorable penguins. I feel extremely out of place being surrounded by these clumsy creatures but I still am amazed by their fascinating life styles.

This female student engages positively with the unfamiliar landscape (she says she is “relaxed” and “super excited”) but also expresses a sense of personal dislocation with “I feel extremely out of place”. I found this feeling of mixed excitement and anxiety expressed repeatedly across students’

work – for example, in this male student’s response: “I am feeling happy the views are mesmerizing and beautiful. I also feel afraid that I might get lost or die.”

Students’ responses during the first group interview suggest that they found video a useful means of accessing information about unknown places. One student suggested that “the Tobago one was good because you could actually see the scenery and the landscape and also you could visualise it,” while another preferred the ‘Watchdog’ documentary we had watched as it “like explained everything that was going on and it like showed you as well as explaining.” Another student compared the relative utility of the two types of film (personal travel documentary, versus sensational holiday show), claiming:

I preferred Watchdog because when we watched the other one [...] it was like...we were seeing it just from one view like she grew up there whereas with Watchdog we were seeing it as tourists so how we would have felt.

Perhaps this student valued the opportunity to be able to virtually ‘visit’ a place as if she were a tourist, rather than a local, because it matched her personal status more closely.

When asked if they found the videos useful for inspiring their writing, the interview group students responded positively. This might be a case of the “interviewer effect” (Taber, 2007, p.185), but their conversation nonetheless suggests that they found it helpful: “it was easier to write because you’ve seen it with your own eyes” and “yeah, I think we learnt stuff from it.”

In the second questionnaire, all students said ‘yes, very’ (7), ‘quite’ (6) or ‘don’t know’ (2) in response to ‘did you find it useful to use films to inspire your writing?’ (Table 3) Triangulating these responses with their written work, it seems to me that many of these students did, in some way, benefit from the use of film during this unit of work, particularly in terms of the explanations and vicarious experience that film could offer.

Yes, very	Quite	Don’t Know	Not very useful	Very unhelpful	Total responses
7	6	2	0	0	15

**Table 3: students’ responses to the question
‘Did you find it useful to use films to inspire your writing?’**

My second research question was: ‘how is students’ learning about ‘travel writing’ influenced by looking at photographs of unknown places?’

In the second questionnaire, film remained more popular than photography but even within the reduced sample size, 4 students (25% of respondents) said that they ‘preferred’ to work from still images for creative writing, an increase from the original set of data (Table 4).

Photographs	Films	Total responses
4	10	14

**Table 4: students’ responses to the question
‘Did you prefer using film or photographs to inspire your writing?’**

In response to ‘how did photos help you think about ‘travel writing’?’ students repeatedly reported that photographs could function as springboards, rather than fact-files, to stimulate ideas: “because it set a scene that you could work of”; “because you see what it is and you can expand on it”; “in photoes you can imagine more and make up more.” In contrast, students’ responses to the question ‘how did films help you think about ‘travel writing’?’ often cited the addition of sound and speech as adding a realistic dimension to moving image media, for example: “because people could include oppinions and feelings”; “yes because it give you more detail than photos because they talk” and “it helped you use speech accents”. One student explicitly addressed this notion of realism with, “[the films] made me think of reality”.

The responses about reality and imagination in the questionnaires are corroborated by a discussion recorded during the second group interview: “Um – well you can look more into photos than you can in films cos in films things are kind of moving really quickly and when you are looking at photos you can kind of look more into detail.”

This notion of examining the photographs tallies with my lesson observations: students enjoyed poring over the A4 colour photographs I had printed off, and when I showed the class a selection of Alex Maclean’s aerial photographs on the board, one student asked “are they really real, Miss?” and several requested longer to look at the pictures.

While the questionnaires suggest that some students’ opinions about still image media had perhaps begun to change in the light of their work on ‘travel writing’, the interview group demonstrated more decisive developments in their consideration of the relative utility of photographs and video as visual stimuli:

C: Well I think photos [are better], just cos of what H just said [...] Just because, like, watching videos gives me more, like, knowledge...like, it helps me learn more. But, like, photos makes me think more.

CB: Well when you're watching a video you're taking in knowledge like C said but when you're looking at a photo you're using knowledge that you've just learnt to sort of spread it out a bit to make it better than what they've just used in the video.

The students' work suggests that many of them had taken elements of the moving image stimuli we had watched and then re-presented this reality in the form of creative writing by 'spreading it out' to incorporate imagined details amidst the fact. One male student chose to write about the Sahara for a task during which students wrote descriptions of the same place from an aeroplane and from the ground. In a previous lesson, his group had watched a Lonely Planet video about the desert. He wrote:

the hills of sand from above look no more than creases in a pair of jeans. The yellow of sand, like the sun it burns. The individual grains of sand, bunching together like an atom [...]I feel like I'm walking through lava.

His writing gives figurative detail that he could not have obtained directly from the two-minute documentary; yet it could be that without the background knowledge deriving from the moving image stimulus, the student would not have attempted to write creatively about this particular place. Of course, it is likely that the student already knew about the Sahara, but I could not measure individuals' prior knowledge of all places we might encounter together. What interests me here is the leap that the student has made from the facts of reality to the subjective texture of the place.

On the other hand, several students did not specify a location when they began to write, and as a result produced 'travel writing' about generic tropical locations, in spite of providing a high level of detailed description. One female student wrote about a beach:

every grain of sand is different, as the sea crashes against the shore you see white bubbles appere and disappear the building are a range of hights and sizes, kids are smiling and laughing as they run in and out of the sea...yellow and oranges the sea goes yellow to blue. The sand is the sun cut into tiny pices.

The final metaphor is a sign of her potential as a writer, but her failure to locate her imaginary place in any kind of reality, however 'spread out', means that it lacks the edge of realism that the students so celebrated in the moving images they used as inspiration, and which defines the 'creative non-fiction' genre.

Others demonstrated cultural misunderstandings or generalisations (perhaps due to the distinctly mono-cultural make-up of their local area) which border on xenophobia but which do allude to the sense of ‘otherness’ or sense of alienation often immanent in ‘travel writing’. One boy wrote in his final assessment about a “tribal mud jump” which he deems “utterly pointless”; “obviously I refused”. While his derisiveness of the practices he describes betrays a certain disdain for unfamiliar cultures, he also applies social understanding and factual knowledge to conclude that “I couldn’t really say ‘no’ because I felt that I was being disrespectful towards his tribe” and “coming to this place made me realise how much money I have and they only get by on 10p a day [...] Africa has shocked me.”

In the end of unit questionnaire, all students said that their writing had improved ‘significantly’ (3) or ‘to an extent’ (12) (see Table 5), with explanations ranging from the technical (“I’ve learnt to use more complex sentences, and better vocabulary” and “I can use semi-colons”), to the creative (“I have learnt how to use more descriptive vocab” and “in my writing I have been more creative and planned what I am going to write”). These perceived improvements might have been influenced by students’ over-familiarity with the types of ‘targets’ they regularly set for themselves to measure their progress in English, and might therefore have nothing to do with the effect of still or moving images on their writing. One respondent, however, while clearly still lacking in technical accuracy, suggested that they now have a better grasp of genre, which could be attributed to work on camera angle, empathising with others’ views and documentary-style film clips: “I learnt to write subjective and understand autobiographical.”

Significantly	To an extent	Stayed the same	Got worse	Total responses
3	12	0	0	15

**Table 5: students’ responses to the question
‘Do you think your writing skills have improved?’**

My final research question was ‘how far do students’ own experiences matter when writing creatively about travel?’

Since I did not gather any quantitative data to test this question against, I can only speculate by triangulating the qualitative data I gathered from interviews and responses to the ‘open questions’ on the questionnaires.

While it seems that students rated personal experience more highly than vicarious experience via the mediums of film and photograph, it does appear that if personal experience was lacking, film and photographs provided a useful bridge between imaginary lands and personally experienced places. One student in the second interview explained how she planned for her assessment:

I used the pictures that we used round the tables, ‘cus I was gonna do Bora Bora but then I thought there’s nothing *really* to write about that so then I thought I could like do it on like a Greek Island from like you know that lady like, like overlooking like a balcony. Yeah, I got the inspiration from that.

This student had an on-going interest in Bora Bora and had chosen it as her group name in a previous activity, but she had no more personal experience of the place than a meal in a restaurant of the same name. In a previous lesson, students did a word-association carousel activity with colour photographs. One showed an old Italian woman leaning over her balcony in Rome. This student’s writing, therefore, would have deviated emphatically from the reality portrayed in the photograph; but, despite Anderson’s (2013, p.119) and others’ emphasis on bringing reality to bear on creative non-fiction I do not think this is truly problematic. The photo stimulus acted as a prompt to consider a specific location, just not the precise location described in the photograph.

On the other hand, several students’ writing demonstrated detailed knowledge of locations which suggested personal experience of the places, and which gave their writing its strength. When asked during the interview why he would write about Bormio in Italy, one explained it was his “most recent holiday [...] it’s like fresh in my mind.” His final assessment was one of the best in the class, including specific yet lyrical descriptions of: “the view of the town and mountains behind it. The old oak log houses, the ski shops closing for the day, the pizza shops opening for the night.”

One student’s ‘travel writing’ assessment revealed to me an aspect of her identity I had been previously unaware about, when she wrote about visiting her family in the Philippines. She explains:

we quickly stop of to change some pounds to pasos I can’t wait to go shopping £20 is P1200 in the Philipiens [...] I found myself asking for a drink in taglog I luckily did it right, “pweding huma ng Royal” [...] I’ve got to admit I’m pretty proud.

The nature of the task means that it is difficult to assess how far her trip had been fictionalised, but the inclusion of dialogue in Tagalog, and references to food, transport and customs of the locality really strengthen her otherwise technically inaccurate writing – particularly where she acknowledged her emotional reactions to her strange position as an outsider in her native country.

The piece ends with a “massive typhoon” and “over half [her] family there all missing”. I am unsure whether this frightening detail refers to the recent Typhoon Haiyan, or has been included as a dramatization of the real event. Either way, this student’s writing about a place she has personally experienced demonstrates the advantages that actual experience might afford for writing creatively – and powerfully – about place.

When writing about travel, students regularly cited reference points from their school, social and cultural lives to help them to make sense of unfamiliar places. When playing ‘word association’ as a means of stretching students’ vocabulary, for example, students responded to a photograph of a ‘busy’ Tokyo street, suggesting associations which were familiar to them, personally experienced: ‘our school’, ‘One Direction concert’, and ‘Nandos’. Students also used knowledge from other subjects to interpret the unfamiliar: one female student used knowledge presumably learnt from Geography to write, “I think Tobago is very tropical and is an LEDC”, while a class discussion revealed that students had just learnt the term ‘aerial perspective’ in Art, which they were now applying in their oral analysis of a passage of ‘travel writing’. During the carousel word-association activity, students responded to each other’s ideas by drawing lines and adding further comments to existing descriptions. One chain of ideas around the photograph of the woman in Rome was built around students’ shared knowledge of a popular ABBA song: ‘Mamma Mia’ – ‘here we go again’ – ‘My my...’ – ‘how could I forgive ya!’ From the intensely personal to the cheerfully light-hearted, the students’ own cultural experiences, even within the school environment, did seem influence their interpretations of place.

Based on James Carter’s suggestions for inspiring creative writing, I provided students with a ‘drafting sheet’ to help them plan for their assessment (Carter, 2002, p.86). The sheet comprised questions to encourage students to focus on describing the landscape and interactions with other people (Appendix 4). It also included twelve thumbnail photographs which students could use as ‘inspiration’ for their stories. Anderson (2013) is critical of such resourcing, but as an optional resource, I felt it might be of help to students who did not have a recent personal travel experience upon which to draw. Students were also able to access the colour print outs if they wanted alternative visual inspiration. Several students in their planning completely ignored the pictures, while several others explicitly drew upon them to shape their writing. One student had circled the pictures of a busker, palm trees, fish, boots and a boy with fish, eventually writing “I look at one of the fishes and see its beautiful frogspawn eyes, its coat of scales like corrugated metal and its gills

as deep and dark as the craters on the moon.” Far from quashing creativity, the picture resource had inspired original figurative comparisons and impressive description.

Conclusions

I feel justified in claiming that many students’ learning about ‘travel writing’ was supported effectively by films and photographs, but at least one student did not need moving or still images at all to inspire his travel writing. This student’s planning suggests that he was heavily inspired by Michael Palin’s ‘Pole to Pole’ which we had been using during the scheme. His drafting booklet explained that “I will fly to Antarctica from London which will take 32 hours altogether including stops at Hong Kong and New Zealand. I will be wearing specialised clothing made for the cold of Antarctica” and even specified the team he would travel with (“Pilot, Bill – cameraman, Geoff – my friend”), just like Palin, in the account he gives of his journey.

What is clear is that this class seem to lack in experience of other cultures and that this had a major influence on the type of writing about place that they were able to produce. I think it would be very interesting to see how students’ assumptions about ‘place’ and ‘otherness’ vary across schools with more diverse student populations, and contrast with these students’ choices in their writing. I began my research struggling with the problem of teaching this genre of ‘creative non-fiction’ to students who most likely would be lacking in the subject matter (personal experience of ‘travel’) required to write well creatively in this mode. At the end of my research, this concern endures. While still and moving images might go some way to bridging the gap between ‘experience’ and inexperience, the students’ young age and limited exposure to ‘other’ places means that their personal reflections on these images will remain, for the most part, influenced by their relative inexperience in the world.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire

I am: Female Male

1. Which of the following do you prefer? Tick one box.

Films Photographs
 Television Illustrations, drawings or paintings

Why?.....

2. Look at your answer to Question 1. Name your favourite film/picture/photograph/television programme:

.....

What do you like about it?

.....

3. Read the statements below. Rate how strongly you agree with each statement by ticking the box that best fits your views. Only tick one box in each row.

	I strongly disagree	I disagree	I don't know	I agree	I strongly agree
'Looking at pictures helps me understand ideas and themes in novels and poems'					
'Looking at pictures inspires me when I am doing creative writing'					
'Watching films or clips or documentaries helps me understand ideas and themes in novels and poems'					
'Watching films or clips or documentaries inspires me when I am doing creative writing'					
'I enjoy working from images when I do creative writing'					

4. Have you used images as inspiration for your own creative writing before?

Yes
 No

(if yes, how many times? Please specify).....

5. How do you feel about creative writing in school?

You might consider these questions: what do you like about it? Do you enjoy it? Why/why not? Do you do it enough? Do you find creative writing easy, or difficult? Why? Do you prefer other types of writing?

.....

Appendix 2

Questionnaire #2

We have been working on Travel Writing using film clips and photographs.

We had film lessons on: Maya from Tobago; the penguins in Antarctica; the group reports from the YouTube clips you watched; the 'Holiday from Hell'.

We had photograph lessons on: looking at landscapes from above and below (then making paper aeroplanes); extending our vocabulary with the photos and posters on the floor; sequencing our Travel Writing stories using photographs.

1. Tick the box that best fits your opinion (one for each row)

a) Have you enjoyed the Travel Writing unit?	Really enjoyed	Quite enjoyed	Neither enjoyed/ disliked	Did not enjoy	Really disliked
b) Do you think your writing skills have improved?	Significantly (a lot)	To an extent (a bit)	Stayed the same	Got worse	Don't know
c) Did you find it useful to use films to inspire your writing?	Very useful	Quite useful	Not very	Very unhelpful	Don't know

2. How have your writing skills improved? Please explain.

.....

3. Did you prefer a) using films to inspire your writing b) using photographs to inspire your writing?

.....

Please explain your answer:

.....

4. How did the films help you to think about Travel Writing?

.....

5. How did the photographs you looked at help you to think about Travel Writing?

.....

Appendix 3

What is the study?

I am conducting a study on the impact of using images within the classroom and how it affects students' learning about Travel Writing.

Do I have to participate in this study?

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. If you do not wish to participate this will have no negative repercussions. You may withdraw from the study at any time.

What else does the study involve?

I will be taking a sound recording of the interviews about the lessons, which I will refer to when I write up my research later on. There will be one interview after the first set of lessons using video images, and another after the lessons using still images. I will not use your name in the interviews.

I will collect some examples of work to include in my research. All the work I use in my study will be completely anonymous and will only be shared with the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge. I will return all of your original work.

I will also ask you to fill out a short questionnaire after the lessons to see how you found learning in this way. This will also be anonymous.

Any data or recording collected during this study will not be used for any other purposes than my small-scale research project.

Throughout the study I promise to guarantee confidentiality and anonymity. Real names of people or the school will not be used in this study and the readers of this study will not know the real names of you (the student). Any participant will be able to see and comment upon any writing regarding their own contribution to the study.

Do you have any questions?

Appendix 4

Drafting sheet for Travel Writing Assessment

Where will your journey take place? *What panoramic views will you see? What close up details will you give?*

What will happen? *Use 5 of the images to inspire your travel writing. Put them in any order you want to inspire a story. You can interpret them however you wish. How will you finish your piece of travel writing?*

Who will you mention in your writing? *What will they look like? What will they say? Plan dialogue to include.*