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CPL Podcast: Extended Response Writing 7-12

Host: Carly Boreland
With: Joanne Rossbridge and Kathy Rushton

INTRODUCTION:
You're listening to the JPL podcast from the Centre for Professional Learning. Here's your host, Carly Boreland.

Carly Boreland:
Welcome to the JPL podcast for the New South Wales Teacher Federation Centre for Professional Learning. I'm Carly Boreland and I'm the Editor of the JPL. Today I'm talking with Joanne Rossbridge and Kathy Rushton about how you can improve your student's *Extended Response Writing* in high schools. Kathy, Joanne, welcome!

Joanne Rossbridge & Kathy Rushton:
Thank you!

Carly Boreland:
Now, I'll ask a little bit about you first Kathy, and then Joanne as well, because you've had a big range of experiences teaching in lots of different situations and working with primary schools and high schools. So can you let us know a little bit about how you've come to develop this idea that you have about what will work effectively for students?

Kathy Rushton:
It's about social justice, Carly! So, I've been an ESL teacher in primary and secondary schools and I've always been interested in Aboriginal education and in migrant families because I am a first generation Australian myself - English speaking myself; but my family aren't all English speakers. And when I became a teacher I realised how important it was that teachers had a very sound knowledge about how language was developed because that is the only way we can help disadvantaged young people break through the barriers that prevent them from entering into, not just tertiary education, but into the kind of lives they want to live. And universities do their best to prepare young teachers but they're not preparing them for individual students. They are as much as they can, but there's a wide range of experiences that a teacher might have in Australia. So I think this was the thing that made me most interested in helping teachers to do this *because it's the hardest thing.*

Joanne Rossbridge:
So, I would agree with everything Kathy just said! Most of my experience has been in South West Sydney; so, disadvantaged schools, EAL/D students. I was an EAL/D teacher too, it's funny that we both were - I think that's rather significant - and again it's about access: access to schooling; access to

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language; and letting students in on the secret. And a lot of that is the role of oral language but also having knowledge about language and how it works and how it works in different context in schooling.

Carly Boreland:
And so being able to help all students get their message across then is the key of what we're talking about.

Joanne Rossbridge:
That's I guess the goal but we also need to assist teachers to be able to equip students to be able to do that and that requires a lot of teacher knowledge and the ability to be able to talk about text explicitly with students.

Carly Boreland:
Okay, so can we get stuck into this then! So, there are probably lots high school teachers sitting out there: they might be in Science classrooms; maybe they're in Geography; PDHPE. There's a big range of places, in a high school, where teachers are trying to help their students to do extended response writing for lots of reasons; partly for the HSC, but for all kinds of really important reasons. What they want to know is how it can work? Can you help us with why some students, and their teachers, find this extended response writing challenging?

Kathy Rushton:
Absolutely! Every school that Jo and I have worked with, or worked in, have structures in secondary schools for the structure of text and teachers help them with that all of the time. But I'm a simple woman, so I will give you a simple analogy. It's like the Kinder surprise with no surprise [in it] when you're not helped at the level of *clause*, or *clause complex*, to develop your writing. So you have the structure (and I'm quoting colleagues in high schools) teachers often write - "try and write in a more sophisticated way" or "this is not formal enough". The students worked really hard. They've read everything. They're relying on their oral language to fill in those gaps in the structure. And they need to be taught more about *clause patterning* ,that moves towards writing, to be able to achieve the type of success that they're after. And just one thing I'd like to add to this: it's not about students communicating; it's about students being the best they can. And I agree with Jo, it's about teachers being able to give them *high challenge* and *high support* in the language that they're using and that's about teacher learning.

Joanne Rossbridge:
Just to add to that, one of the questions we ask roomfuls of teachers is "do your students write the way they speak?" and you can guarantee, everybody nods. But then when we say - "what can we do with that? How do we help students not to sound like speakers when they're writing?" It's kind of like "oh, not sure." And that is the beginning of our conversations because we are showing the differences between *spoken like* and *written like* language.

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Carly Boreland:
So we're going to try something that would seem like a challenge. But, you talk about the importance of the way we help students by talking to them (so conversations about text). And we're going to try and do that today: without any white board; without any modelling that we can write down; and we're going to talk through how some of this would work. So we're demonstrating how you could do this in your class in a way. Could you start us out then? Where would we begin? How would we do this?

Kathy Rushton:
Do you know what? The very first place you need to start is - you're the teacher; do you know what you're doing? If all you've got in your head is a structure and no further detail - "Well sorry! I can't help you!" But, if you know what you're doing, and you know the genre (i.e. the audience and purpose: the implied reader of that text or listener for that text) and you're familiar with the genre in the subject area, (you know what it looks like and sounds like) then you can start looking but it's all about the teacher.

Joanne Rossbridge:
So, if we gave a really basic example; if you had students writing 'Cook arrived in 1770'. The verb- *arrived*, - this is really easy we can turn the verb into a noun which becomes *arrival* and we can put it at the front of the clause and we end up with what's called *a noun group*. - *the arrival of Cook*. Then we can say *in 1770* - that's not finished. *The arrival of Cook in 1770*… you're waiting for something else: you're waiting for another verb; you're waiting for extra information. And that's a really basic way to shift from writing to speaking. So we actually package more into our *clauses* or we turn clauses into things or *noun groups*.

Carly Boreland:
And some people might think talking about clauses and nouns and verbs that's dull or it's too tricky or students don't understand it. What do you think about that?

Kathy Rushton:
I think if you think it's tricky and you don't understand it neither would your students and we all teach what we know. So, I've seen action verbs and nouns everywhere but Joanne is not talking about that. We're talking about how to put clauses together. A *clause complex* or *sentence* so that your text is *lexically dense* (it's got a lot of information in less space) and it doesn't sound like writing. And the teachers, we work with Year 1, can tell you "that sounds like talking; this sounds like writing". The other thing, that being able to do that gives you, is that you sound more authoritative (when you're talking about something factual) because you're presenting your information as statements with an *extended noun group*. Now, what I'm saying now means nothing to someone who hasn't been helped to understand what that is. And, personally I feel, teachers should not beat themselves up about this. They've all paid for a degree, they got it - they're champions- but what they need is some more professional support around this area.

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Carly Boreland:
And we should feel confident we can continue with the good work that's been going on in primary schools way back from first class when they're talking about clause etc. and we should keep going with that kind of work.

Kathy Rushton:
I don't think any teachers can teach this without ongoing support while they're teaching. Kindergarten to Year 12 - *it's too hard!* So, we test literacy and numeracy but we don't *teach* literacy and numeracy to teachers while they're teaching.

Joanne Rossbridge:
And I guess your point about K-12 is really important. High school teachers do need to know what's in the K-6 Syllabus; as do primary school teachers need to know what's in Stage 4 and 5. And, that's a big part of it too, that if we know *what's gone before* and *where we're heading to* that's going to make a difference. Particularly, I would say for English secondary teachers, there's a whole lot of assumed knowledge in the English content of the current Syllabus that doesn't really make a lot of sense until you go back and look at *what's gone before*. Again, it's about conversations isn't it? - talking about your documents; talking with each other; constantly practising; thinking about the possibilities. And I think we both say *having a go*. And if you don't think you know everything (not anything but everything) - who does?
So put yourself out there.

Carly Boreland;
So we've got an article that you both wrote for us for the JPL *Helping Your Students to Become Better Writers*, can you help us with some other resources, or places that teachers could go to, to upskill themselves as well?

Joanne Rossbridge:
Well, we have some books ourselves. Before I say our books we should say (and these are all published through the *Primary English Teachers Association of Australia* [PETAA]) because it's primary English teachers it doesn't mean they're not applicable to secondary teachers - let me stress that. It just so happens that's where a lot of good things are published and often it's looking at the middle years anyway. So there's a book called *'A New Grammar Companion'* by *Beverley Derewianka*. It's commonly known as the green book (because of its colour) … technical name. There's another book called *'Grammar and Meaning'* by *Sally Humphrey, Louise Droga and Susan Feez* and that's called the blue book. And they will tell you all the knowledge; the teacher knowledge about grammar that you need. You don't need to go googling noun groups or *nominalisation* In fact, don't do that because you'll end up confused. That's all you need. We have other books; one is called *'Conversations about Text 1'* which is with *literary* text and the other one is *'Conversations about Text 2'* which is more *factual* text and a more recent one is called *'Put it in Writing'*. Now the idea of those is - what to do with the knowledge about language. So the green and the blue book will tell you what you need to know and the other books will

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tell you what it might look like in classrooms. I guess it's to stimulate, motivate, and give examples. Not necessary say "you do this" but it gives you a way into thinking about what other teachers have done. We do have examples from teachers we've worked with in the past.

Kathy Rushton:
We both philosophically convinced that *Halliday and Vygotsky* know what they're talking about. So that learning difficult things like this is through conversation. So those books *A Grammar Companion*, the older version have being in public schools since 2004. A copy went to every primary school in NSW but I don't think teachers used them because it was too hard. It's not because the book is pitched too hard. It's just that if you've got no context for this information, and no colleague to discuss it with, its hard to bring it into your teaching. Some people have been using them (but not enough) and high schools didn't have access to them. So the other thing with *Primary English Teaching Association* is that *English Teaching Association* is about subject English, Literature, teachers of English in secondary school. Why the *Primary English Teaching Association* is producing these materials is that English in primary school, by definition, is always included literacy across key learning areas as well as subject English. So these books are totally absolutely applicable for secondary schools.

Carly Boreland:
And I like your point about that it's a hard thing to do on your own. So have you got some examples for us for of where you've seen schools try and take on this issue and sort of work together in ways that have worked that maybe other people could learn from?

Joanne Rossbridge:
The first thing I would say - is that it has to be long term and you need strong leadership. I tend to work in schools 3, 4, 5 years and it takes a lot of time to develop that confidence and conversations and it can be done through a variety of ways.

Carly Boreland:
You're right and that take -up time – how long it takes to see some improvement that's something lots of people have been talking about because it takes a while to keep at something and I suppose, as teachers leave a school, then more people come and so you've got to just keep at it.

Kathy Rushton:
It's not the students (they can learn overnight); it's the *teacher learning* that takes the time, especially when your mindset (and this is influenced by many things currently) the mindset is that literacy is somehow a set of skills that can be taught that way or learnt from a book. It isn't!

Joanne Rossbridge:
It's got to be *conversations about meaning* not this is what you do to do well in a certain test. If you talk about *meaning* and possibilities, that's when it's exciting. Grammar can be exciting!

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Carly Boreland:
Can you give us some examples? I know both of you deeply value this a lot but also you have good fun, when you're talking about grammar, and in any case it matters that we can help our students and we need to get better so that we can do that. Can we play with some more examples about how you could do this to begin with so that teachers can hear that it seems achievable if they put some effort into it?

Kathy Rushton:
If they don't know what we're talking about, they need to do a course. It's simple as that; so that they can meet other people and talk about it. So most people listening to this, I would think, aren't school leaders. If you are; please get in touch with CPL now! But if you're not a school leader - you're a classroom teacher. I think, ask yourself, "what professional learning can I undertake where I can meet like-minded colleagues?" And now that we've got technology; that's a way to stay in touch with people.

So you can start doing it in your own classroom and, as a teacher I'm sure of this, if you see improvements in your student's writing, and you share it with your colleagues, they're very excited to know what it is you've been doing. Teachers love to share. No-one goes into the job for the money; they go into because they're interested in the profession and in their students. And, I'm glad to be saying this for the Teachers Federation, because it is a social justice issue. It's a social justice issue that the most disadvantaged students in our society should be able to get teachers who can help them do the best they can. And language is always the issue: whether we're talking about Maths; or Science; or English – it's *literacy* that holds students back from achieving their best.

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Kathy Rushton:
Here's an example of a *joint construction*, the steps you can take are starting with an image in which some action was happening. Have you got a suggestion Joanne?

Joanne Rossbridge:
So, maybe something like using an image of a camel race.

Kathy Rushton:
The Camel Cup!?

Joanne Rossbridge:
Yes, why not!

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Kathy Rushton:
Fantastic! Could you suggest some dot points that a student might give me that I can record in the past tense?

Joanne Rossbridge:
The camels running!

Kathy Rushton:
So, if the student says in the present tense "I want to write a recount so I'm going to make that adjustment and recast it and say 'oh the camels were running"'. So I've put it in the past tense. "I see banners there." "The banners were fluttering" or "fluttered"- could you write that instead? (*You could*) That's the type of question you ask in a *joint construction*. We're talking about *tense* but we're not saying "we are talking about tense". So we're going to make a whole lot of dot points about the image which is the '*Camel Cup Race, Outback Australia'*. "The banners are fluttering, people are riding" (*people are riding, yes*) so "they were riding" or "they rode". We got a whole lot of dot points.
This is what I can say to the students "Look we're going to write a factual recount of name the genre. The genre is writing about something that actually happened in the past."

Now one of the aspects of that is *description* isn't it Jo? (*Yes*). So, students here's a great way to use your words carefully, whatever you've got there you can join a dot point like this. You can use *who* for people, *that* for people or things and *which* for things. So in this case because none of those camels are my pet Freddy the camel, they're going to be things. So the camels which were (*running*) oh, which were running! Now why have I done that? It's because it's less homework. I can join my ideas together in a sentence and make them clear for the reader but put more information in there. So Jo, how could I put a couple of those ideas together?

Joanne Rossbridge:
So the camels which were running…

Kathy Rushton:
I can hear from your voice there is more to come.

Joanne Rossbridge:
…while the banners were fluttering…

Kathy Rushton:
And I can still hear there is more to come.

Joanne Rossbridge:
…were ridden by many different people.

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Kathy Rushton:
Gosh, that's a great long sentence. We've now made a *lexically dense* sentence. We've used an *adverbial clause of time*. We've used an *adjectival clause* starting with *who*, *which* and *that* to add information to the noun group. Why lexical density? That's what makes you cry at Uni. You put all the ideas together more information in a shorter space - you pack it in. That's what a tertiary education requires you to read. It's harder to read but it's more densely packed. I think Jo said you get "more bang for your buck" - more information in a shorter space. Now if you do something as simple as this; tell students to start at least one sentence joining their points with a *when*, that's an *adverbial clause*, a *dependent clause in the first position*. So, if you started off with "when the Camel Cup took place", yes and if you want to get the top mark in NAPLAN for a variety of sentence structures you should have at least these 3. So you could put a *dependent clause in the first place* but just tell the students, start one with *when* or *while*. You could also say put some information about the noun *after* the noun not just before. So some magic tips, did you say grumpy old camels? *(Camels, I did)* "Grumpy old camels which were ridden by grumpy old cowboys." Or is it camel boys? So you can pack in the information and you're developing a more *lexically dense text*. Do we have to talk about *clauses*? Not if your students aren't ready. You can just tell them to "use *who* and *which* and *that* use *when* in the first clause" to get things rolling. "How about some conjunctions?" Which ones does everyone use from oral language and *then*. So one of them is *additive*, and one of them is *time*. You can use those books Jo talked about to go in and pick out from the list, you don't have to invent it, a whole lot of replacement conjunctions. That already will be a better text.

Carly Boreland:
And it sounds to me like you sort of separating out what the student knows about the matter (whatever it is you're talking about). You can feel confident "here's the stuff I know about it" and then you are empowering them in a way because you're helping their literacy so that they can achieve more highly.

Joanne Rossbridge:
What's going on is: those students, who you know, know their content (and you can hear them talking in your ear) and you go "I know, I know Carly knows all this stuff" but when you read their responses, you go "it's just not quite right!" but you can't really articulate why. It's actually their literacy that's holding them back; not content knowledge. And that's why this matters as well.
So there's a couple of things; it's the *field,* so in this case it's camels or the Camel Cup and you can say "I've taught them all about the Camel Cup, they know all about that!" That's okay (and [teachers are] very good at teaching *field* in secondary context). Excellent! *Subject matter* you know; this is our *content.* But, then there's a couple of other things. There's the *tenor*. Who are we communicating with? So, how do we want to sound? Do we want to sound like an expert on camels? Do we want to sound like we're sharing an experience with a friend? We'll make different choices because of the *tenor* (and, therefore, different ways we use language and vocabulary). And then the *mode*. This is probably what we are looking at particularly here: how we put our ideas together; how it hangs together as a cohesive text. And that's when we get into text sounding more like writing; sounding more academic formal etc. And that's the big one. *Field*! We're excellent at dealing with *field* But the *tenor* and particularly the *mode*.

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We've talked about *nominalisation* and *theme of clause* and building up big chunky *noun groups* and so on. All of those can relate to the *mode* of the text (as well as the *tenor* and the *field*). But, particularly, they're resources for dealing with the *mode* of the text and its overall cohesion as well.

Kathy Rushton:
And, forgetting about what students know and thinking about what teachers know, if they're using '*PEEL SEAL ALARM'* or any of those structures, we're just saying –"keep on with that and add this in the gaps" and that is the bang for your buck.

Joanne Rossbridge:
And I would also say, ***listen*** very carefully to your students and what they say *orally*. Because sometimes when we hear what they're contributing to say a *joint construction*, as teachers (and I see this a lot) teachers take the student's response and turn it into the written response but don't explain it.

Carly Boreland:
Yes and that's what I was just thinking as you were talking, I've spent probably more time, than many teachers would, really *modelling* text [and spending] so much time working on writing with students. But, as you were talking, it occurred to me I don't think I've asked my class, or a student –"how do you want to sound? What are you trying to sound like?" I just assume that this is how I want them to sound, and that they know what that is too, and for some reason they can't get there.

Joanne Rossbridge:
So that's probably getting into the *tenor* and having that discussion about the *audience*. And that typically, in secondary classrooms, what's most valued, as you move through school, is sounding more academic-like and having authority, over the subject matter, for the audience and that's a valid discussion. If those discussions aren't happening; start there. Don't worry what a *noun* or a *noun group* is – start with those conversations because that will give an opening into getting down into the nitty-gritty. But I think you're right - that conversation is often missed along the way.

Kathy Rushton:
And it's important - we don't want to teach children about *noun groups*. We want to teach students about the *meaning* of the text they're constructing. And we should know about noun groups; it's a tool. That's the really important thing. But, I picked up on one word you used then - *modelling* - and I think this is the issue. Jo and I think the *joint construction* is the critical conversation about text and the problem is a lot of *modelling* takes place, but it's like 'Dancing with the Stars' - they've modelled it for you. Can you dance like that now? No, what you need is a *joint construction* where you think aloud; and question; and prompt; and reflect with the students; and you share the pen. Now that doesn't happen enough in secondary schools. And more of that is the *thinking time* where students actually learn. I think it doesn't happen because you've got to be a brave teacher to do it. Don't think you have to be an expert. You

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just have to close your eyes and say – "bless me I'm going out!" and be brave enough to say to the students "I'm not sure; I'll ask whoever"'.

Carly Boreland:
And making that time - could you give us an idea sort of, in a lesson, how much time might you spend doing something like this? So that teachers get an idea that it might be achievable in their lesson, because we are so content focused. How much time do you devote to this kind of stuff?

Kathy Rushton:
You just have to ask yourself this question -"Do I want my students to be able to *read* and *write* and *listen* and *speak* in this subject area?" and then devote some time to it. So it's about being brave enough to take up the *Slow Teaching [Education] Movement*.

There's no point rushing through the content if no-one can write about it effectively, and if they can't read it effectively. So I think you have to, and teachers are expert at this, assess their own students - how much help do they need? Personally, because I've worked with disadvantaged students, like Jo has, and often a whole class of EAL/D students (some of them with interrupted schooling and low levels of literacy). If you say to them "I'll do the writing; this is just for you to think and talk" - they're really relaxed! And I'm quoting a Year 5 student, the other day, I did this lesson with their class and their classroom teacher and he said, "I think it was really good being able to put up those dot points, before we wrote, because it was relaxing and helped us know what we were going to write next." And they did wonderful *recounts* that the teacher, principal, everyone was happy with. I think it's just committing yourself to saying - "this will take more time but it will have a bigger impact." So after you've started to do that, students, who sit up the back and don't engage, they're engaged because you say – "you can say what you think, we're going to help you, we're going to share how to spell it, how to write it, we're going to help you."

Joanne Rossbridge:
I think the other thing with *joint construction;* its purpose isn't to produce a whole text or masses of text. It's not about "let's get up as much as we can"; that's not the point at all. Often, it's most effective when you don't produce a lot of text. But you really work with; and play with; and discuss; and you know, really mold and craft, the text. And that's real, I think that's real teaching. It's not about "let's just produce a whole lot of text" - what's the point? *(Quality!)* Quality and conversation!

Carly Boreland:
Joanne and Kathy, thank you! You've taken me to a new place as well and made me think about my own teaching. And so I really do appreciate your time today and we love having you here at the CPL too. Thank you so much and we hope to see you here again in our podcast as well.

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You've been listening to the JPL podcast for the NSW Teachers Federation's Centre for Professional Learning. I'm Carly Boreland, and I'm the Editor of the JPL. To find out more and to listen to further podcasts you can visit our website at cpl.asn.au/podcasts.

CONCLUSION:
The JPL Podcast is produced by the Centre for Professional Learning and the New South Wales Teachers Federation. All opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the individual speakers, and do not necessarily represent the views of their employer or associated organisations. The host was Carly Boreland; technical direction by Jason Nicholas.

Kathy Rushton **has worked as a literacy consultant, ESL and classroom teacher with the DEC (NSW), and in a range of other educational institutions. She is interested in the development of literacy, especially in socio-economically disadvantaged communities with students learning English as an additional language or dialect. Kathy is currently a lecturer in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney.**

Joanne Rossbridge **is an independent literacy consultant working in both primary and secondary schools and with teachers across Sydney. She has worked as a classroom and ESL teacher and literacy consultant with the DEC (NSW). Much of her experience has involved working with students from non-English speaking backgrounds. Joanne is particularly interested in student and teacher talk and how talk about language can assist the development of language and literacy skills.**