

What has writing ever done for us? The power of teachers' writing groups

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Abstract

This article proposes that teachers writing together develop confidence and self-realisation and strengthen pedagogy through the practice of writing and through the conversations which arise around written texts. It outlines a brief history of teachers' writing groups and suggests what it is that characterises a growing number of teachers' writing groups that are part of the NATE writing project. The authors suggest that writing groups have an impact on teachers that goes beyond the development of craft.

Storying the person contextualises him or her, makes that person present to us in all his or her humanity.

But this kind of deliberation does something more: it can direct or redirect a teacher's actual practices.

(N. Lyons and V.K. LaBoskey, 2002: 14)

Introduction

The research described here arises from our long-term engagement with teachers' writing. It goes back to a series of commissions/workshops at NATE conference in the early 1990s, prompted by Pat D'Arcy's response to the US National Writing Project and which focused on the teacher as reflective writer. It was soon apparent that participants had important things

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that they wished to write and that writing, talking about the process of writing and reflecting on the implications of the experience for classroom practice were a powerful and unpredictable mix. The conference writing groups very rapidly created a community that wished to continue writing and sharing beyond the conference. In 1992, the workshop gave rise to a writing group that met and continues to meet for residential writing weekends. The authors have been part of that writing group ever since. (1) The impact of working with this group seems to be profound. In this paper we begin to sketch out a map of what we are learning from being involved with teachers and writing. We begin by outlining a history of teachers' writing groups. We provide a rich description of the distinctive nature of workshops and conclude with reflections on emerging theoretical underpinnings of this work.

Teachers' writing groups are threaded through with narratives, especially those of the self and of classrooms. We use narrative inquiry as an apt means of investigating and documenting the scholarship of teaching, rooting inquiry in practice. We have drawn on observations and personal journals, teachers' writing, including that posted on shared websites, and interviews with participants. (2)

Teachers writing

Teachers writing together has an honourable history. After the Dartmouth Conference 1966, when English educators were invited [and funded] to meet with colleagues from North America for a month's discussions, John Dixon wrote:

...teachers of English at all levels should have more opportunities to enjoy and refresh themselves in their subject, using language in operation for all its central purposes Teachers without this experience – who would never think of writing a poem, flinch at the idea of 'acting', and rarely enter into discussion of the profounder human issues in everyday experience – are themselves deprived and are likely in turn to limit the experience of their pupils. On the other hand...just because language is so vital and pervading a concern, mature men and women can surprise themselves by the imaginative power they suddenly realise they possess, given the right opportunity.

(John Dixon 1967: 107)

This prompted Frank Whitehead (1970) to provide drama and creative writing sessions as part of a full-time course for in-service teachers at Sheffield University. The creative writing was particularly successful in persuading him that this should form a part of all in-service training for teachers, just as Cremin (2006: 432) suggests that 'the learning entitlement of teachers, ... should involve written composition at their own level.' In 1974, the Bay Area Writing Project (Camp 1982) sowed the seeds for what would become the US National

Writing Project, which has maintained a strong and sustained, properly funded, presence.

The findings of two NWP studies, NWP Legacy study (National Writing Project 2008) and the Local Site Research Initiative (NWP 2008) show that participation in the NWP has an impact on retention, progression and personal development which is reflected in the classroom. The Local Site Research studies show significantly greater gains in students' writing achievement compared with classrooms where teachers had not participated in the NWP. NWP teachers attend intensive four-week summer writing institutes located in universities. Whilst a key principle of the project is that teachers of writing should write in order to develop the meta-skills to understand what it means to create a text, it soon became clear that writing together had further benefits.

In interview with Richard Andrews, Richard Sterling, Director of the NWP, USA 1994 – 2008, observed:

the added benefit that I think was hardly understood at the early days [of the project] is that when teachers start writing extensively, they discover things about themselves as learners that are almost an epiphany ... the writing is at the centre, and they are writing all the time. I can only say to you it is one of the most powerful things they take from it; it engages them intellectually in their profession again. It's extraordinary to see and it happens every time....

That's the heart of it, the personal engagement.....So writing is very important but it's not about turning them into creative writers, fiction writers, drama writers; that's not the point. The point is that the process of writing is a way to organise your thinking and your learning and also excite you about what you know yourself.

(Andrews 2008:37)

In the light of the success of the American NWP and a national concern about the standard of children's writing in England, Richard Andrews made a persuasive case for a National Writing Project for teachers (Andrews 2008) and, despite failing to secure funding, continues to promote the idea. Whilst teachers' writing groups may be gaining credibility, there is still no clear model of how these might work in the UK. Teresa Cremin's research with writing teachers has focused variously on 'creativity and writing' (Grainger et al. 2006), on uncertainty and discomfort (Cremin 2006) and on teachers' identities as writers (Cremin & Baker 2010). The Writing is Primary project (Ing, undated) emphasised the importance of leadership and whole school commitment. Teachers' writing was seen as a means to develop teachers' confidence to model writing in the classroom. The Teachers and TAs as Writers project,

overseen by Jonathan Rooke, takes as its focus the kind of writing and writing practices that teachers might expect children to undertake in primary classrooms. The rationale for UK teachers' writing groups has tended to emphasise craft knowledge and is less likely to characterise writing as a process that informs thinking and learning.

Our experience of leading and of being a part of teachers' writing groups is that thinking, learning and shaping are at the root of writing together, which has had implications for the approach we take. In 2009, encouraged by teachers' responses, by concerns about writing standards, and by our observations of school pupils' experience of writing, we set out to establish writing groups to support interested teachers and to help us to articulate what happens when teachers write together.

The groups

Four writing teachers groups have been meeting regularly for the last three years. One is the Buckinghamshire Teachers as Writers group, for which Richard Andrews has acted as a critical friend. These teachers are part of a focused research project reflecting on their own writing and teaching and observing children's progress. Two groups are based at the University of East Anglia, one for practising teachers and one for student teachers. The fourth group arose from a LATE (3) conference workshop and has continued to meet monthly in public spaces in London – in galleries and museums, on the Circle Line, in Regent's Park. Other groups, formed briefly at NATE conferences, exist virtually, or in waiting. The group to which we have belonged for twenty years sustains us and informs our thinking. All groups have access to an on-line writing community with protected access. The moodle provides spaces where teachers post their own writing and reflections on teaching and respond to each other; it is an important added dimension to how these groups operate. All groups are part of the over-arching narrative research project that seeks to find out what happens when teachers meet and write together.

The experience

In this section we aim to evoke a sense of the distinctive nature of the writing groups we work with. The workshops combine writing and reflection in a way that is particular to teachers and has the potential to make a significant impact on continuing professional development. We shall refer to workshop leaders as animateurs. We use it in the sense that it is used by Lucas (2003) and have found it helpful to indicate the nature of the role:

a practising artist, in any art form, who uses her / his skills, talents and personality to enable others to compose, design, devise, create perform or engage with works of art of any kind.

Although we may not describe ourselves as artists, we might describe ourselves as creative practitioners and, in this context, we call upon our

experience and practice of both teaching and writing. We begin with expressive writing; see how it moves out to the transactional and the poetic (Britton 1972). The job of the animateur is to create the conditions for writing; to be sensitive to and nurture a community of learners; to be aware of the ways in which individuals are experiencing the group; to listen carefully and, especially in the initial stages of a writing group, to behave in ways that convey the values and principles of teachers' writing groups as we have come to understand them; to pay heed to the pedagogical implications of what teachers experience, foster dialogue and share related reading.

The group begins with a notebook. The accoutrements of writing are important. The notebook signals that both the writer and the writing are valued. The valuing of the individual and of the act of writing underpins all workshop activities. At the beginning of any new workshop we are conscious of the need to affirm and reassure, and to signal that all things are possible and very little insisted upon. Individuals may write whatever they wish, may subvert initial writing prompts for their own purposes, may choose to share or not, will quickly discover that writing can be funny and shocking and unexpectedly personal. We know from experience, the data confirms it, that people who join writing groups are likely to be ambivalent about writing. There will be excitement and nervousness, and sometimes serious resistance

Workshops have an established pattern which is designed to build confidence and create spaces for personal and shared experiences. The emphasis is on the complexity and pleasures of language and on reflection. It is the experience of writing coupled with reading, response and reflection that is important. Each teacher/writer is likely to take something different from the workshop and what they take is likely to have a direct impact on their teaching:

.....what I have noticed developing is my sense of who and what I want to be as a practitioner, and when and where and how I might achieve it. I suppose, if I wanted to be grand about it, I could say that my 'philosophy' of teaching English as a whole has grown.

And this, I think, must be directly attributed to the members of the group – both new and old – who I do genuinely think offer such inspiration, whether that be through their writing (which so often just amazes me), their conversation, or their exploits in the world beyond the group (or lunches after it) – be they activism or academia, making music or making cardigans.

Secondary teacher, NQT

Many teachers, even those who have signed up for a workshop, feel ambivalent about writing. At early meetings, the recording and sharing of

moments from writing histories begins to reveal some of the affordances of writing, and why many might also resist it.

Writing remembered: examples from writing workshops:

Writing to the tooth fairy.

I remember writing at school and having my teacher write a comment and filling with pleasure because she responded to what I'd written.

Writing a play about a king and his two daughters ... became a discouraging experience as the teacher dismissed it straight away. I was 9.

Aged 10, Expressing anger in a poem and forgetting my anger while becoming involved with language.

Having an essay pulled apart at University by a new tutor, who then praised my higgledy-piggledy rhapsodic tosh! Saved.

I am still annoyed about this: - I was told off *all* the time at school for writing outside the bounds of my imagination.....

Writing my MA – experimenting with ways to produce enough words to turn the computer off with a clear conscience.

Writing out his name – over and over and over and over ...

Considering writing experiences provides a springboard for thinking about the experiences of those we teach. Writing is difficult; crafted from the slipperiness of language. It is tied up with our sense of self – apologies and disclaimers before reading are legion, and are often banned. It can take us unawares to unexpected places. Writing exposes us in so many ways, so it is hard to write and even harder to share. However, although most people have stories to tell about the ways in which their writing was ridiculed in some way, or how their writing unwittingly caused unhappiness, most have also experienced some of its pleasures. Perhaps they are able to retrieve some of that in the simplicity of the open workshop where we acknowledge that writing does not seem to get any easier. Writer and artist, John Berger, observes at eighty:

I don't know whether this is true for other people, but it is certainly true for me, that after years and years of drawing it

does become a little easier. Unlike writing, which remains as difficult as ever. So while I'm at the stage of a new writing project where I am vaguely hearing, rather deafly, the demands of a new train of thought, the drawing goes on every day.

John Berger (2011)

Acknowledging the difficulties of writing can be liberating. Although there is certainly a craft to be learned, we begin, as other groups have learned to begin, with the writer and what writing means to them. As writing tasks develop, the writing is likely to become more personal. The atmosphere becomes concentrated and calm, there is some sense of electricity; Animateurs write alongside, although it is hard to do so. Now, one needs to be alert. Is everyone writing? Is there a sign of discomfort? It is surprising how quickly adults engage with writing:

For me, this silent writing time is really important and I am surprised by it, afraid of it, delighted by it when I meet it in school.Sally and Tammy are sitting on the chairs from the circle, resting their writing on their knees. Both have their legs crossed, Sally's foot is tucked behind her ankle, her cheek resting on her non-writing hand. Tammy is left handed. Unlike year 3/4 children these adults are writing in intense communication with the page. Sally has looked up once and Tammy, briefly. Now, at 4.15, pens rest a moment, poised over the page as the writers cast their eyes across the words they have written. At the tables, writers sit, two to a block, Helen and Maureen close together at one table, others at opposite ends of larger arrangements. Now Pauline looks up, gazes back over the page, begins to write again. Tom leans in and out of his work. He catches my eye and looks away. He holds his pen high, away from the page and looks at paper, ceiling, room. His pen is poised.

.....

I am wondering, now, how many people are wondering what to do, caught in a hiatus between finishing their own writing and the dangerous tinkering with their first thoughts on the page.

Journal; JS September 2009

The rhythms and relationships of a writing workshop ebb and flow. The animateur must be aware of spaces, of slowness, and of, then, the need for speed, a change of focus or a shift of mood. The atmosphere can change from moment to moment when people read back. Writers can read their audience into breath-held silence, the welling of tears, helpless paroxysms of laughter. The extended silence of a group writing is an unusual gift. It is a luxury rarely afforded them. For many, the writing is 'a road back into myself', the Ted

Hughes (1998: 165) phrase appropriated by one Buckinghamshire teacher and echoed by many others.

I sit in the closeness of my children; loving, demanding and creating worlds out of everything. We stood, holding hands in a circle in a dip on the hillside. I told them it was where the rainbow colours landed and they believed. A butterfly passes, They ask will it be in my story? And then peace. Jack writes, wants to be like me. Phoebe waits for her turn with the pencil and so picks flowers and grass and snail shells for her collecting bag. They try to read my words on the page. It's everyone's right to be private sometimes I say, moving away a little. I need to write myself right again.

Secondary teacher

From the point of view of the animateur, any session is demanding. The responsibility of attending to one's fellow writers is intense. A teacher describes introducing journals to her year 6 class as being like a first date: the unknown, the high stakes, the risk that things can go wrong. So it is for the first writing workshop. It is important that people understand quickly that the space is safe, that they have responsibility for each other, as well as for themselves, and that the space is open, full of possibility. There are few constrictions, no right answers. It is soon apparent that whatever we may suggest people might write, in truth, people may write whatever and however they wish. Unexpectedness is a pleasure.

What continues to astound us is not simply that so many people feel so diffident about writing, but how, in a short space of time, attitudes can be transformed:

We looked at quirky objects and wandered among anthropological artefacts. I wrote about Kant and a pair of goggles; I wrote a narrative piece from the perspective of an ancient, female nude which ended with a mocking, shocking expletive. As I read my work to a supportive audience of strangers, I was genuinely surprised by what I had written. Words had come easily and ideas had slipped out, fully formed. It was my ugly duckling moment. For the first time in thirty nine years, I saw myself as a writer. And it was thrilling.

Secondary teacher

And how quickly teachers desire to share their experience:

I've run a writing workshop for teachers, as part of a twilight INSET session, and was staggered by the quality and depth of

writing produced by the writers in the group – none of whom were English specialists.

Secondary head of department

Once teachers (and children) have realised that they really may write anything and in any way, it is impossible to predict what will be written. Teachers value the chance to write about things that are important to them, that allow them to engage with their own lives. Everyone recognises 'one of those weeks where everyday life [takes] some seismic shifts' (Secondary teacher) which bring us to writing silence. And then the opportunity arises and the writing begins again.

The rhythms of the workshop, and the private and public spaces of notebook and shared website, acknowledge the public/private nature of writing, the value of time for writing and the possibilities of sharing. Although sharing one's writing can be 'bloody nerve-wracking', it is also fundamental to the growth of both group and individual skill and understanding. Sharing might entail reading to one other or a small group, reading to the whole group, or posting writing on-line. First the reader hears their own words on the air and experiences the response. Then comes the talk. At first it is likely to be the amateur who speaks. Thank you is enough. Listeners and readers develop ways of reflecting back something of how they experienced the writing. They make links with their own experience, their reading. They ask questions. Sometimes the talk moves around the subject, flips away from it and returns. They talk about language, imagery, tone, feelings and the life expressed. The more comfortable a group becomes the richer and more exploratory the conversation becomes. Talk encompasses the processes of thought, the elements of the writing, the sense of self as a writer and as a teacher. The conversations which follow a reading, whether spoken or in writing, are multi-layered. Many voices contribute and create a rich text that informs and extends writing and thinking in ways that are particular to the group.

There is an energy that comes from writing with the community and from writing itself a heightened sense of awareness: of self, of self as writer, of pupils, of writing and of language, and of the living of it. These reflections, posted by primary and secondary teachers, give some sense of how teachers have responded.

I think for me it gave me the insight into a process that has unravelled to be more complicated than I could ever imagine. I write. It is important to me and has become an integral part of who I am.

I see and think differently; it has become easier to see the extraordinary in the ordinary.

It has affected me as a reader.....I find.....the words speak to me more clearly. It gives me more pleasure.

I have seen some unlikely students have some incredible successes.

I have learnt that less is more. Having for years taught children using acronyms such as VCOP and SMARQPOP, it has been disconcerting to be asked to strip all that away and find the bones of a piece of writing.

It makes people feel good.

Writing makes people happy. One of the main features of the group is the enthusiasm and excitement with which we all meet up. I feel much happier after the meetings, and although the chat and banter are a part of this, the core is definitely that space that's provided to think and express myself in writing.

Head of department, secondary

And part of that happiness, we think, is the way that writing, and the talk leading from and back into the writing, allow the individual and the group to construct and reconstruct knowledge and to take ownership of how they teach.

Thinking about teachers writing

What happens when teachers meet and write together in the early 21st century is remarkably similar to what happened when Frank Whitehead engaged in his 'creative experiment' in the late 1960s (Whitehead 1970) although we will conceptualise it differently. Teachers write. And they talk about writing, and about how this relates to teaching. They develop understandings about themselves as writers and teachers of writing, about the process of writing, and about themselves as individuals. Whitehead acknowledges that each participant would 'formulate differently his [sic] own account of the understanding and insight gained.' (1970: 82). Teachers find their own way through the experience and engage with it individually. Like the teachers working with Whitehead, teachers today discover themselves as writers and gain 'an insight into the nature of the verbal creative process which it would be impossible to acquire any other way.' (1970:82). The immediate impact is upon teachers' disposition towards children writing, which translates into practice. Whitehead emphasises the importance of personal engagement in writing and reflects on the misconception behind the kind of writing prompts he had been accustomed to using: that of 'undervaluing the validity and inwardness of the pupil's own life experience.' (1970: 85). Today's teachers are still conscious of the under-valuing of inwardness, especially in terms of the expectations of assessment and testing both of children and teachers themselves. However, they are able to harness the possibilities afforded by new literacies. Literacy events and the collective knowledge that emerges are situated in time and place (Barton 2007) and just as each individual makes their own sense of the experience, so groups are developing distinctive literacy practices.

Writing groups become communities of learners (Rogoff 2001), knowledge communities (Craig & Olson 2002), communities of teacher-authors (Wood & Lieberman 2000) which play a crucial role in professional development. The imperative to write adds a powerful dimension to the potential for reflection and growth offered by a group. Teachers share stories of their personal and professional lives within the safety of the group who are not only part of a spoken conversation but who respond as listeners and readers to texts read aloud and read on screen. Narrative authority (Craig & Olson 2002) emerges from the implicit narrative knowledge individuals develop through experience and shapes the way they choose to author their lives in relation to others. The pedagogical approach that informs the writing groups we describe relies on the degree of trust that can be built up between participants and fosters authenticity. The group is conceived in such a way as to seek to recognise and legitimise the literacy practices of each individual and, by implication, those of the children they teach (Larson & Marsh 2005). In a two-year study of two North American NWP sites, Wood and Lieberman observed that 'NWP professional development activities uphold the value of individual voices and points of view....They build on the assumption that learning flourishes in communities capable of creating shared commitments without sacrificing multiple perspectives.' (2002: 260). These principles are conceptualised around three semantically related ideas:

authorship – everyone's voice matters;

authority – everyone has something of value to teach others; shared ideas and understandings are rendered trustworthy through critical dialogue and lived experience;

and authorisation – teachers' voices need to be made public beyond the confines of the group.

Already participants have presented and published within their own schools and beyond.

The growth of professional authority is more complex than simply changing practice. Indeed, if we are to engage seriously with young people as they write, to honour their voices and to engage with the craft of writing (Myhill 2001) we need to have the personal knowledge not only of the craft but also of its complex and uncertain personal processes. It has been argued that 'half the skills a writer needs to learn are skills of psychological sturdiness, and the other half are skills of literary craft.' (Bly 2001: xix, in Morley 2007: xii). Writing teachers groups provide a space for this kind of growth. Although writing is uncomfortable and there are personal ghosts to lay (Brandt 1937), many participants express their pleasure in writing and its impact on both their well-being and that of children. One primary school teacher who has been struck by the links writing has with children's wellbeing, finds herself

repeatedly returning to the phrase, 'inhabiting my life more fully', to convey what the writing group has meant to her.

Many participants report the wellbeing that comes with writing, even when alone. David Morley (2007: 3) suggests that writing wakes you up 'it forces you beyond your intelligence and quotidian attention'. Whilst acknowledging the dark moments, he values the capacity for writing to make the writer feel absorbed, 'concentrated yet euphoric' and points to research that suggests we are neurologically changed by writing as much as by reading. Writing affords us the opportunity to make connections and to write ourselves into possibility. Akin talks of writing herself 'back into the text of teaching...to insert myself more fully into a vision of teaching that I have taken part in constructing.' (2002: 66).

Whilst writing has the capacity to shape and structure experience, it can also unsettle. And writers must engage with the shifting nature of language which leads Morley (2007: 5) to suggest that 'there is no wrong or right about the pedagogy of writing.' Given the complexity and uncertainty of writing and a medium that seems at once ephemeral and adamant, one can be forgiven for avoiding it. We suggest that reading aloud, the response of a known readership and the multi-layered conversations which grow out of writing and response play a crucial part in professional development and the potential for change.

There is a secondary source of happiness, which is linked to the purpose of teachers being agents of change. I love talking about writing and the teaching of writing to all of you. It stops me becoming a bewildered and exhausted education drone, constantly running to keep up with the latest government dictat and keeps me hopeful about the job that I do every day.

Secondary teacher, Head of Department

We see writing as, potentially, a strongly democratic activity (Freire 2005) that is linked to one's sense of self and the articulation of personal voices or voices. Although we do not insist on it, the sequence of reading aloud, experiencing an initial unspoken response and then engaging with the conversations which follow have a significant impact on writer/teachers. As groups become more settled, conversations deepen. They have a potency that we are only just beginning to articulate.

In his careful analysis of children's narratives, Michael Armstrong maintains that 'teaching, in the context of works and the making of works, is an interpretive art.' (2005: 179). He places the act of reading, interpretation, at the forefront of the teacher's responsibility. First the reader believes (Elbow 1972; 2000), inhabits the work, acknowledging its authority; then draws out the work's conscious and unconscious intention, form and content, the light it

throws on life. The teacher represents to the author her understanding of the work, a time for questioning, sharing perceptions and finally looks to the future as 'implicit in the work of the present.' (2005: 180) Group conversations implicitly enact these elements, moving between personal anecdote, the recommending of reading, reflection on teaching and recognition of shared experience. When individuals write what matters to them, the value of writing is foregrounded and may well reveal what lessons might best help them to improve. If they are to engage with individual writers, teachers need to be able to draw on understandings which are grounded in practice and in one's sense of self. Teachers make changes to practice because of the confidence derived from writing, being heard and of hearing that stories of others. They draw on the experience in their classrooms.

I then asked the children if anyone wanted to share their writing. They did. I explained how vulnerable we can feel when people respond to our writing and that our responses should be meaningful and heartfelt, that it was better not to say anything rather than just think something up for the sake of it.

Year 6 teacher, language co-ordinator

Changes to practice happen almost immediately a teacher has experienced a workshop. What is learned is often what the teacher/writer already knows.

Has it changed the way I teach? Absolutely. Now, when I demonstrate writing in class, I am less inclined to magic up a McExtract which captures a pre-specified objective and more inclined to write whatever the students are writing. I try not to tell students to be quiet and work while I patrol the rows; I make the effort to take up my pen with pleasure. My starting point is less often a text type or a technique and more often a stimulus which I think my pupils will enjoy. As a result, the students seem less resentful and more respectful of the writing process. When we share our work, which is now more likely than before to reveal shards of ourselves, I encourage students to listen carefully and to comment. I struggle to give levels and to standardise, but that does not mean that I do not assess. At the end of the lesson, I ask everyone to reflect on what they have learned. I reflect too because at the beginning of the class, I could not have anticipated what would emerge.

Secondary teacher

The amateur withholds judgement, creates a safe space, welcomes playfulness, relaxation, celebration. The amateur does not impose, holds back, lives with uncertainty (Kitwood 1998). Such are the conditions of writing workshops which provide a touch paper for teacher agency and whose

lessons are instantly enacted in participants' teaching. This paper has emphasised the conditions of the workshop and its impact on teacher development because that is its starting point. There is much more to be written, discovered, developed about what happens in classrooms, workshop conversations, and how individuals and groups come to understand more about writing. (4)

Notes

¹Jenifer Smith ran the NATE workshops with James Britton, Nancy Martin and Gordon Pradl. Simon Wrigley joined the group in 1992. Both authors have been influenced by their experience of working with James Britton and Nancy Martin.

²All participants have given informed consent and are represented anonymously in this paper.

³London Association for the Teaching of English

⁴If readers in the British Isles are interested in joining a workshop, or would like to create a group, please contact Ian McNeilly; director_nate@yahoo.co.uk.

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