

Build a Book in an Hour and an Quarter

This workshop is a cut-down version of one I've frequently used in schools. The Build a Book Workshop started out as a method of enabling schools who could not afford to pay for school visit nevertheless to enjoy one. The children produce a book that parents and other interested parties buy. The profit on the book pays for the author visit. Often there is enough profit also to support a charity of the school's choice and sometimes that charity can be the school itself, even quite appropriately sometimes the school library.

I've now completed several of these visits and it soon became obvious that although the fund-raising is still welcome the Build a Book Workshop takes the student through all of the processes involved in "building" a book – so much so, in fact, that I now also offer this as a paid visit with the school using all of the profit for its desired charity.

Students have the opportunity to:

- go through a creative process that leads to a product: i.e. write a story, poem, piece of creative non-fiction or other similar item for the book.
- critique and edit the creative product
- select what will and what won't be included in the book (Oh yes, some difficult decisions have to be made here. We have the choice of making it very 'real life' and allowing student to reject some work or this can all be teacher controlled perhaps ensuring that each child has a least one piece of work 'published' and no one has more than three pieces included.)
- design the book
- illustrate the book
- produce a cover
- market the book
- attend a book launch

Particularly important is getting the motivation right for the initial creative process. Cynically we may think that the whole point of writing is to get published and have that published book sell millions of copies. Yes, that is part of it. Yet we also have something to say. This has been replicated in miniature in several of the books we have built:

- a book that supported a children's hospital had courage as its theme
- a book supporting Child Line and the NSPCC took on an anti-bullying
- a book supporting cancer drugs for children contained stories about hope.

It was this creative motivation that I wanted mainly to look at with the participants in the workshop at the November 2015 NAWE conference in Durham. I also wanted to give them a sense of some of the fun that can be had in working towards producing a book. These days quite a few traditionally published writers also self-publish but often with little joy and with a great sense of responsibility. They either complete every process themselves, which is very time-consuming, or they have to buy in services from others. Editing is all-important and that's usually the first and often the only service to be paid for. The rest is doable though may be tedious. Most writers especially dislike marketing. In the Build a Book Workshop, there is no tedium. Even reluctant writers are motivated to write. In the second half of the day, students work according to their whims and their strengths on illustration, book design and marketing. There is a buzz about doing whatever it takes to get this book out there.

Creating in 75 minutes what takes at least full working day in a school is a challenge. Often the schools do quite a bit of follow-up work and anyway the Build a Book Workshop has sometimes taken up three or more working days or even lasted several weeks. The plan for the NAWE conference was to keep it simple. It intended to:

- introduce participants to the Build a Book workshop
- quickly establish a cause
- complete some warm-up exercises to get us into the writing

- invite participants to complete a little critiquing and editing
- offer them the chance to provide some illustration (Everyone can draw. Oh yes, they can.)
- discuss the option of creating a web site rather than producing a physical book or even an e-book. I've used this option several times with schools that only wanted to raise money for a charity and did not need to cover my visit. This is also much more quickly available. It can be linked to the charity concerned with a Just Giving button if required. In any case, for the adult participants of this particular session, it was probably more important to find a theme that worked for all of us rather than a charity to support.

It didn't quite go according to plan for two reasons. Firstly, there was great interest in knowing more about how the Build a book Workshop operates in schools. I had to field many questions before we could start some practical work. Secondly the shocking events in Paris on the 13 November that had kept us silent at breakfast on 14 November were still slowing our thoughts at this session early on Sunday morning.

However, this did at least give us our theme. We wanted to celebrate Paris and express our sorrow about the events. It was clearly time for my "Gargoyles and Angels" exercise. This is really an exercise about using opposites. The first time I completed it, I used gargoyles and angels. The name has stuck. We divided our theme into what we love about Paris and what horrifies us about what has happened.

I've used the "Gargoyles and Angels" exercise many times in schools but with much simpler themes, for instance, to contrast summer and winter, home and school, or town and country. I've even used it in some workshops on creative writing in other languages. Even though here we were using a much more complex theme, it remains a useful exercise in getting the ideas flowing and also in producing some fresh, unclichééd language.

This works best if students use lined paper.

First I discussed the theme of the Paris attacks and we decide on two sub themes: “We love Paris because” and “What happened on Friday in Paris saddens us”.

I asked them to fold the paper into four vertically, to produce four columns. At the top of the column on the left they wrote the word “I love Paris”. See Figure 1.

Figure 1

I love Paris			

We worked for five minutes on writing down everything we could think that we liked about Paris. Participants could use odd words, phrases or whole sentences. They must never cross the vertical line, however, but go down to the next line. See Figure 2. The words in italics are mine.

Figure 2

I love Paris			
<i>Artists</i>			
<i>Champs</i>			
<i>Elysée</i>			
<i>Dark cafés</i>			
<i>Quartier</i>			
<i>Latin</i>			
<i>Map like a</i>			
<i>snail</i>			
<i>Le</i>			
<i>centre</i>			
<i>Pompidou</i>			
<i>Cigarette</i>			

I stopped them and asked them to fold back the column they have been working on so that they can no longer see their words. See Figure 3.

Figure 3

I asked them to write the word “saddened ” at the top of the right hand column. See Figure 4. Again, we worked for five minutes on writing down everything we could think of that saddened us about the Paris incidents. I reminded them not to cross the vertical line, but go down to the next line. Again, the words in italics are mine.

Figure 4

		Saddened
		<i>Emergency</i>
		<i>services</i>
		<i>Sirens</i>
		<i>Flashes</i>
		<i>The smell of</i>
		<i>fear</i>
		<i>screams</i>
		<i>Ordinary</i>
		<i>folk</i>
		<i>Candles and</i>
		<i>Flowers</i>
		<i>Mark the</i>
		<i>Spot</i>

Then I asked them to fold back the column as they did the first one and then turn over the paper do so that the two columns line up. See Figure 5.

Figure 5

Saddened	I love Paris
Emergency	Artists
services	Champs
Sirens	Elysée
Flashes	Dark cafés
The smell of	Quartier
fear	Latin
screams	Map like a
Ordinary	snail
folk	Le
Candles and	centre
Flowers	Pompidou
Mark the	Cigarette
Spot	

They now had a collection of words they could refer to throughout the rest of the workshop. It's also worth looking at some of the lines that go across. They may have created some extraordinary language.

The lists we actually produced were a little longer and had more words in each box. We typically used lined paper from A5 note books. The illustrations above give you a flavour.

We then used one of the clusters of words we'd written to produce a poem or a piece of flash prose. After about twenty minutes of writing, we shared our work. We were aware that our writing was still a little raw so we were going to take it home and work with it further.

Here is my contribution, now considerably polished but still not quite ready, about the "Emergency Artists".

"Emergency Artists"

They've called upon us again. They always do when something like this happens. So I get out my colours, my pencils and brushes and my pallet and I try to paint.

All I can smell is the linseed oil. The strong tobacco and the rich coffee are gone because the cafés are shut today. The children aren't playing on the streets anymore. Even the traffic is subdued. No one goes out unless they have to.

I can't work. I need the jollity buzz. It may have gone forever since those fervent believers blew themselves and a few hundred other people up.

I sigh, and put away my pens and palette, my colours and my brushes and wish I wasn't an emergency artist."

We also did some drawing. Here again I used an exercise I've frequently used in schools to motivate children who say they can't draw. Indeed, a group of established writers can be even more self-conscious about their drawing than school children. There were no illustrators amongst us. I must acknowledge Anthony Browne here as he first showed me this exercise. Each participant makes a random shape on a piece of paper. They then pass the shape to another participant who makes it into a picture. The results are always astonishingly good. That Sunday morning was no exception. I'd brought along pencils and colours so we had a bit of fun.

I always use colours in my school visits. Many of the illustrations will be in black and white but if we start with a coloured picture and turn it to grey scale, the picture has more texture than a line-drawing. Often, the cover ends up being a collage of these pictures. The coloured pictures anyway can be used in promotion materials.

The hour and a quarter went very quickly. We spent the last fifteen minutes or so talking about the use of the Build a Book Workshop in schools. The participants had many questions. The burning question though was “Is it really easy to organise a Build a Book Workshop in school?”

Well, it’s not difficult and it can be fun. It does have to be well-organized, however.

One of the challenges is getting all of the work presented in an acceptable digitized form. Certainly it should not fall to the teacher or the writer to type up everything. Follow up IT lessons could allow the students to complete word-processing their work. Work could be saved to a shared drive and presented in an accessible form to whoever will put the book together. Any administrative help offered with this should be welcomed.

In any case, teachers may want their students to carry on working on their texts. The Build a Book Workshop may just be regarded as a kick-starter, especially if it takes just one day. Your one day in school can provide quite a lot of material for the teachers. This may be worth remembering when you prepare your budget.

A further challenge is getting the book ready technically for your printer, e-book provider or for your web site. My book *The Build a Book Workshop* explains this in detail. I gave away copies of this e-book at the session at the conference in Durham and am happy to do so for anyone reading this article. Email g.james1@salford.ac.uk and specify if you would like a copy as a PDF or for your Kindle.

There is something enormously satisfying about producing a book with a group of young writers. Most schools organise a book launch inviting friends and families, governors and colleagues and of course, you, the facilitator. It's another call on your time, of course but they are always good fun.

Bibliography

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Bio

Gill James is a senior lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Salford. She writes short and flash fiction for adults and longer fiction for children and young adults. She is a frequent visitor to schools and has run several Build a Book workshops. She ran the workshop described above and has written the book about it in order to give writing colleagues the opportunity to enjoy this activity.