Fantales: The tale of an English teacher in search of an idea
or
How information technology found a real place in my classroom

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> ABSTRACT: *This narrative provides an account of one teacher's use of a minimal, real-world text – a Fantale lollie wrapper – in her classroom as a means of motivating Year 7 students to write concisely and imaginatively. It discusses the success of this strategy and the way in which information technology was utilised in the production of facsimile texts. Examples of student work are provided.*
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> KEYWORDS: *Writing, information technology.*

INSPIRATION BORN OF DESPERATION

My Year 7s were bright, energetic and reasonably cooperative. We began a series of lessons by cleaning up the mess left by the previous class. After one big clean-up of the room, I decided that I should buy some lollies to show that I was appreciative of the fact that they didn't complain. Sadly enough, the effort of buying the lollies meant that I only had boring lesson plan offerings that day. Running in to the petrol station shop, I grabbed a packet of Fantales to hand out in class.

While we sat chewing and sucking, I prayed for a good idea to fly into my brain. And this is what I said.

> *One day in 20 years time I am going to be sitting on the couch on Saturday night with my husband watching* The Bill *(because it will still be on Channel 2, and I still won't have thought of anything I'd rather do) and I'll unwrap and eat a Fantale. As I fight the last bits of caramel out of the ridges of my molars and swallow that last bit of chocolate, I'll be rolling the waxy Fantale wrapper between my fingers. Just before I reach for the next Fantale, I'll unroll the wrapper and read it. And it will be you! Yes you! I'll say to my husband, "Hey I used to teach this kid!"*
>
> *Now your job is to write the wrapper. If you're going to become famous enough to be on a Fantale wrapper in 20 years what will it be for?*

Those of you who know what Fantales are will remember sucking off the chocolate to get to the hard caramel toffee while reading the wrapper with a mixture of curiosity and disdain. The double meaning name (it is a tale for a fan) only adds to the delight.

Tongue firmly planted in cheek, I offer the following (Figure 1):

Greta Caruso
Born into a large family in 1957, Greta soon realised the importance of being heard and noticed. Teaching was the obvious career. After working away at the chalk face for decades imparting the beauty of Joni Mitchell lyrics, impersonating Henry Lawson's bush undertaker and reciting Mercutio's Queen Mab speech, she struck upon an idea for using Fantales in h er teaching. This idea was picked up and spread throughout the Asia Pacific region, having a p rofound impact of teaching pedagogy and literacy. In accepting the award for "Greatest Teacher in her Own Classroom" Greta graciously thanked Brenton Doecke and Terry Locke.

Figure 1. The writer's fantasy

UNPACKING THE GENRE

Before we began with the writing, we looked closely at the Fantale wrappers. An investigation of the hallmarks of the genre was conducted. Every student counted words, so we could work at the range. We looked at the concise, truncated, but not telegraphic language. We looked at the type of information given, such at dates and career highlights. We looked at the order of the information given. We noticed that there was a sort of collapsed narrative. We noted the headings, for example, "Stars of Yesterday" or "Stars of Today", and got ready to write.

The task proved challenging, even for the better writers in the class. Many students needed to do more than three drafts to get the order of information worked out. The most difficult aspect of the task was to write concisely. Students helped each other, but mainly they needed me to show them how to reduce the word count and keep the meaning. I work-shopped some examples on the board and walked around the room, as you do. Students realised that if they could compress meaning they could fit more in, and all of them were interested in telling their stories.

I usually get a bit exasperated with drafting, and students soon find it tiresome. In this case, however, students wanted to get their Fantale just right. They knew it was valuable only if it was authentic. I was surprised at how much time the drafting took, and how difficult it was for students to exert the level of control over language that they would need in order to complete the task.

IN COMES THE TECHNOLOGY

Then, the information technology came in. A student suggested that he go and scan a Fantale wrapper. He worked out that all we needed was one edge, which he could flip

for the opposing edge. I worked out that all we needed was a yellow text box in the middle for students to write their stories in. Another student worked out that we would need a 6-point font. This worked well, and with some fiddling we were able to get a Fantale wrapper out of the printer that was exactly the right size, shape and colour.

Once I had done one for myself and showed the students, a new round of enthusiasm was upon us. They wrote and drafted and edited and printed. One student had the idea of drawing on the Fantale wrapper with a candle. This gave the wrapper that waxy feel, and made it realistic enough to fool their year-level coordinator. Some students printed out lots of them then used them to wrap lollies in. One particularly proud class member framed it in a basketball card frame.

There would be many ways to achieve the product, depending on the resources of the school. All you really need is one computer. One laptop per student would be nice, but only a few schools have this. The template for the wrapper can be mounted on the network, and students can download it, or it can be on the teacher's computer and students can e-mail their writing, bring it on disk or type it straight on. My guess is that there not one Australasian classroom exists where nobody knows how to scan, and nobody knows how to create a text box in Word. That person might not be a teacher, or it might take the combined efforts of a few class members.

For me one of the exciting things was working with the students to put the technology to work for us. I knew what I wanted: the development of concise writing. The students knew what they wanted: the glory of their own Fantale wrapper. The joint aim was to develop skills in English while enjoying ourselves. The trick was to use the hardware, software and information technology support staff for our purposes. Once we had the idea in mind, and the notion that we could make the technology do what we wanted, the rest was easy.

Some of my guidelines for the use of information technology are:

- If the activity can just as easily be done on pen and paper, then that is probably what I should be doing
- Think carefully about learning time before requiring students to use complex programs
- Tick the box, select the correct answer type activities have a place, but surely we can think of more to do with technology
- Unless you have a real state of the art network and state of the art network manager be mindful of Murphy's law.

This exercise met all of these guidelines. It was simple, did not take a lot of time, was valid in terms of language learning and, to adopt one of the key words of Middle Years propaganda, was engaging.

THE REVELATIONS

What the kids wrote was better than I had expected. I had inadvertently given students permission and opportunity to fantasise and a genre to shape it. The fact that

the genre is very real and published made all the difference. The futures that students imagined were revealing. Some imagined themselves as sporting heroes, models, wrestlers, film stars and pop stars. For many students humour was important, and for some infamy was more appealing than fame. Other students made great contributions to the world by curing cancer, third world poverty or negotiating Middle Eastern peace. Others became Davids to the wicked Goliaths of the world by inventing operations systems that brought down Microsoft.

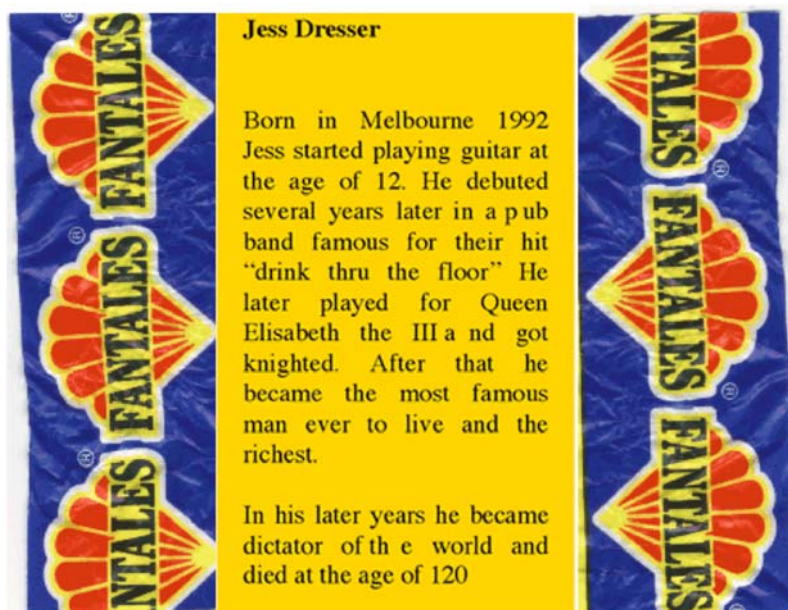Below (Figure 2) is one example of the finished product.

Figure 2: A student version

I was moved and saddened by the dream of one student who struggled to keep up, as he wrote about his successful life after finishing VCE as the top student in the state. I had one student who throughout the year had achieved a perfect or almost perfect score for every graded piece of work. His parents were highly ambitious, and he was truly one of the most dour and serious students I have ever encountered. In his Fantale wrapper he became the most successful game show host in history comparing *Sale of the Century*, *The Price is Right* and *The Weakest Link*.

Here are some other examples of student work:

Eleanor Scott
This dark-eyed, intense actress started her career playing a lead role in the school play called "Carnival". A scout had come to watch the play and decided to give Elle a chance by giving her the lead role in the *Princess of Thieves*. Many people thought this was a superb and that's how her acting career started. She's now 17 staring in the moving *The Ring II*. She has also one three awards

Merryn Nethercote
Merryn started her life in 1992. She started off buying a KMart trampoline at 8 years old. At ten she started training. She was twelve when she was chosen for the state squad. At thirteen she was competing

for the National titles in Queensland. By 2008 she was chosen for the Youth Olympics. At 21 things really started happening for Merryn when she was invited to join the Australian Olympic team. She became famous in the news for her gold in trampolining. She is now coaching what she believes to be the next line of little stars.

The part of English where teachers see personal expression and the development of identity is possibly the best part. It is where we get to see students make their mark on the world as a language object, and we get to be the audience. It comes to us in lots of ways, particularly through writing and discussion. I had the double bonus of teaching a writing skill that I thought was transferable to other situations in life, and opening a little kernel of personality.

LIFE MIGHT NOT BE A BOWL OF CHERRIES, BUT IT MIGHT BE A BOX OF LOLLIES

I decided that we had done such a good job that we should tell Allens about it. The Allen's web-site was, at the time, one of the least engaging websites. Quite strange I thought for a big company (Nestle is the parent company) that has kid products. The next task I set for my kids was that they were to look at the website and suggest a game, design, script or activity that would make the website more appealing. Some students wrote and drew their ideas with pen and paper. Some produced fantastic, animated whiz bangery using Flash and other programs. We collected all of this up and sent it into Allens.

Two of the more enterprising students volunteered to write the cover letter. It included:

- A key offering: "We think all kids would like to write their own Fantale wrapper, so why not mount a downloadable template on the Allen's website?"
- Some extra bits: "Included is a pile of suggestions for ways to improve your website."
- A touch of hard-nosed bargaining: "Please be aware that all the ideas suggested are the intellectual property of the students. If you would like to use them you can contact us."
- A big hint: "We really like Allen's lollies."

The day that the return letter arrived in the school accompanied by a huge box of assorted lollies is a day that I, and I presume my class, will not soon forget. We negotiated how the lollies were to be eaten. Suggestions included bit by bit, day by day, a fair system of selection and equal distribution, or a monster lolly party at the end of the day where we would eat until we were sick. Guess which suggestion won out.

I have repeated the exercise just described in other schools and it just does not seem to fail. One group of bright-button computerphiles went trawling the internet for companies that sell groovy things and have lousy websites, hoping to repeat the box of lollies trick. Good luck to them I say! This exercise took some students' fancy and they saw themselves as insiders to the advertising game. We had a great deal of

conversation about advertising and packaging, in which rather than simply condemning the whole industry, they were asked to think about it from the manipulator's point of view and consider the question of what the company is trying to achieve.

I am reminded of the 1999 Victorian Association for the Teaching of English conference address of Julian Sefton-Green who spoke, amongst other things, about the affect of creating authentic products. I use the word "product" with consideration. Normally it is not a term that I would apply to students' work, but in this case the outcome was clearly associated with a company (Allens), with a market, with advertising and with a real product. I am not suggesting that we turn our curriculum into things that have a market, far from it, but there is some value in examining the English language as a commercial entity especially when we are showing students show to manipulate those texts for their own purposes.