

Writing to Learn, Writing to Teach: Writing Process for School Community  
Development .

Tumas Dingli Primary School , Hal Warda Street , Attard

**“Communicating from the Inside Out”**

A Text and Graphics Enhanced Version of the Keynote Address presented by  
Dr. Christine A. Johnston  
© September 17, 2005  
Malta  
Europe

**Introduction: Communication is a Complex Function of the Brain-Mind**

Thank you for inviting me to address the Annual Conference of Malta’s The National Writing Project or might I more accurately say the National; “express your thoughts in writing” Project, or perhaps the National “express your thoughts and feelings in writing” Project. Well actually the National “express your thoughts, feelings and experiences in Writing Project. Truthfully I think it should be titled The National “express your thoughts, feelings, experiences, and ideas in writing” Project. Well now that I think about it, I should say The National “express, articulate, communicate, record your thoughts, feelings, experiences, and ideas in writing” Project. Okay, to be frank with all of you, this is what you have invited me to be a part of:

The National “record,

express,

articulate,

communicate your

thoughts

feelings

experiences

ideas in

symbolic representation by consistently using lines  
scratched on paper that have the same meaning each time  
they are viewed by the human eye and translated by the  
brain’s neuro-receptors and interpreted and stored by the  
working memory of the mind for retrieval and use at the  
appropriate moment!

And who said teaching writing was easy?! Well, I thank you anyway for providing me this opportunity and this challenge to help bring the issues of learning, the human mind, and the writing process into a reasonable understanding within the next 30 minutes.

I must warn you in advance that I left my wonder woman suit at the dry cleaners back across the pond, so I can’t promise any heroics here today. Actually my purpose is quite straightforward. I want to help you understand how our minds convert our internal thoughts to external expression. I also want to alert you to the issues you face as you seek to interact with the mental processes of learners who are seeking to develop their writing skills.

## Two Writing Samples: Communicating from the Inside Out

I want to begin by sharing with you two brief examples of written expression, developed by individuals spanning the ages of 15 to 45. One was written by a male author; the other by a female.

### Writer I

I saw emptiness clearly.  
She was hollow and frail.  
I saw her shapeless form.  
She turned and tried to clasp the air  
around her.  
It was then that I heard the release  
of a soundless cry.

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### Writer II

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As we consider the content of each, we find ourselves relating to the feelings of one and struggling to untangle and understand the other. One passage is stark; the other more refined. Each used words to convey an important thought, feeling, experience, and idea. The first used four words; the other almost 40. Regardless of the number of words, is there anyone who could not relate to, understand, or ruminate with the content of the messages being conveyed? What about the creativity each represents? Creativity in format, in word selection, in structure or in topic?

Now I want to switch gears on you. I want you to come with me as we take a few moments and traverse the brain-mind connection and view the mechanisms which have a direct effect upon how words are derived and find expression on a page. This is not a simple journey; it is, however, a vital one. Only when we understand how language works within the brain-mind connection can we begin to connect effectively as a teacher of writing, as a coach of expression, as an emancipator of human thought.

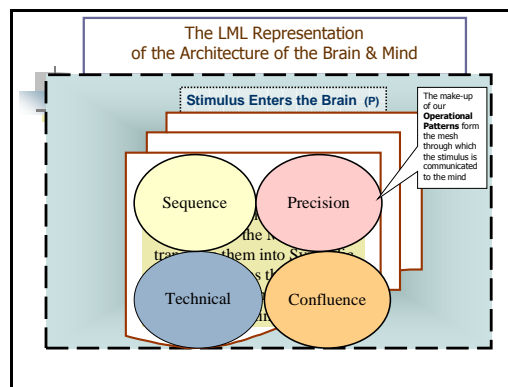
## Communicating on the Inside: Understanding The Power of Our Personalized Learning Processes

To guide us on this journey, I have chosen a vehicle that is near and dear to my heart, the Let Me Learn Process. Almost fourteen years ago, working with a team of international educators including three from Malta, I began to explore how learning occurs within each of us. Over the course of time, I named the process we were identifying as the Let Me Learn Process. LML is not anything we have created. The operations of the mind and the mental processes we use each and everyday are not something we have discovered or concocted. They are, in fact, from my perspective, God given, universal capacities, which define our human essence and provide the means by which we take in the world around

us, make sense of it, and apply it within our lives using judgment, language, and memory. The strength of the Let Me Learn Process is that it captures our personalized learning processes in a way that allows us to understand and use them with intention. The LML Process is based upon an authentic theory of learning which provides a robust and inclusive conceptualization of the brain, the mind, and the relationship and function of each to the other. In addition it provides a lexicon of terms which allows people to communicate in real-time what they are experiencing as they participate in a learning event.

### Communicating on the Inside: Visualizing Our Brain-Mind Processes

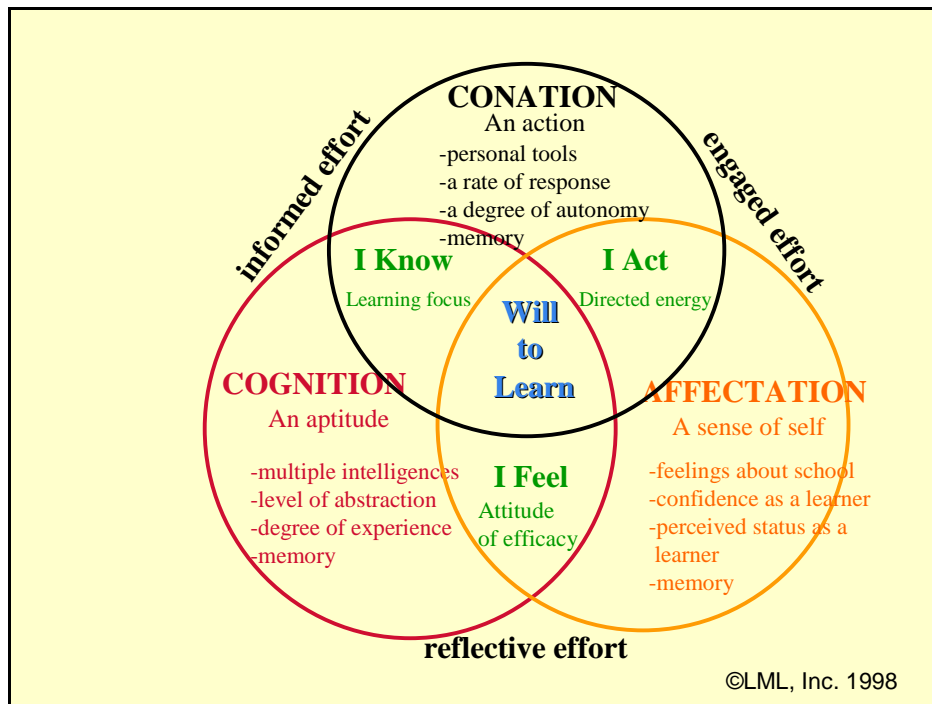
The following graphics depict one aspect of the brain- mind interaction as it works within each of us to create a system of learning based upon stimulus, pattern driven processing, memory, and metacognition.



Situated at the juncture of the brain-mind connection are the operational patterns. The significance of this representation is the strategic role our learning patterns play. It is these patterns and the mental processes of which each is comprised which form the personalized context through which all communication between brain and mind is interpreted. The operational patterns are made up of the following:

- S** = **sequence** (order, plans, directions, linear logic, continuity)
- P** = **precision** (facts, information, documentation, measurement, correctness)
- T** = **technical reasoning** (problem solving through design, structure, physical representation, and pictorial representation without the encumbrance of words; the use of combat engineering to fix or solve a physical or abstract problem)
- C** = **confluence** (risk taking, learning through failure, rapid ideation, extreme imagination, readiness to suspend rules and the limitations of reality in order to move beyond the known)

Our patterns are what we use when we “make up our mind; mind our own business”; and become mindful of the “goings-on” of the world around us. The following graphic depictions capture the complexity and synchronicity of this powerful and very personal interaction.



As stimulus is translated into symbolic representations and processed through our operational patterns, the mental processes of cognition, conation, and affectation within each pattern begin to examine, monitor, and respond to the event. To depict the internal working of each of our four patterns or learning processes, I use three intertwined circles. I conceptualize cognition, conation, and affectation as intertwining mental processes operating within each of our four operational patterns.

### **Communicating from the Inside: Understanding the Infrastructure of Our Learning Processes**

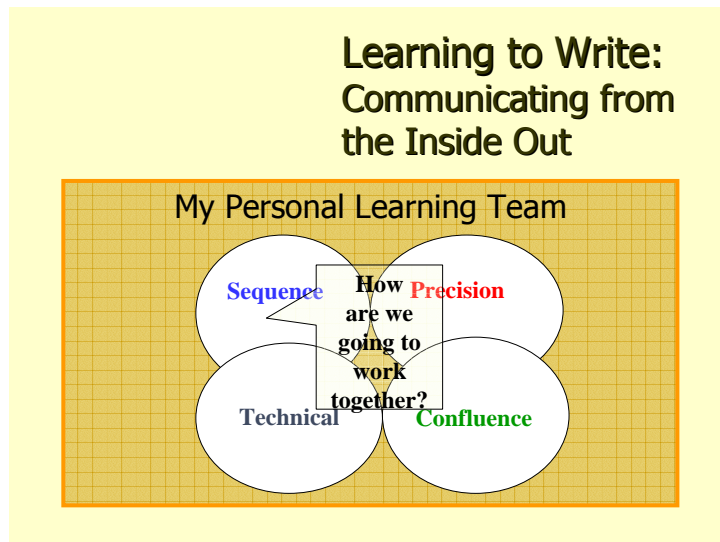
While I recognize that stimulus can initiate activity among these processes at any given point, I have organized my explanation of the interaction of these mental processes by speaking first of the role of cognition. When using cognition, learners initiate thinking by reviewing their bank of prior learning for clues on how to make sense of the current task. Throughout the cognitive processing, the learner seeks to identify what aptitude or intelligence is needed to “crack” the learning task. While identifying and initiating cognitive processing, the learner simultaneously instigates the performance of the task.

The “doing” process reflects the learner’s conative performing trait. Conative performance consists of an individual’s natural talent to perform (skill), rate of response (pace), and desire to work alone or in groups (autonomy). This interaction leads to another turn of the lock’s dial, which produces the learner’s affective development. Here the interaction continues with the learner’s sense of status as a learner triggering a complementary level of self-esteem and producing an outlook of confidence and a willingness to persist in engaging in similar tasks in the future.

As the learner sifts through the incoming stimuli and organizes, labels, grasps, or plays with them, the learner uses *informed effort*. Simultaneously, *engaged effort* moves into action as the learner applies interest, attention, and self-regulation to performing the mental or physical task ahead. It is this engagement of effort that heightens the learner's level of motivation, simultaneously causing the learner to stand back and reflect on his or her development of knowledge and skill. This use of *reflective effort* continues to feed the entire learning process. Without an awareness of the internal chatter and activity of our patterns, we find it difficult if not impossible to use them with intention!

### **Communicating from the Inside: Understanding the Internal Talk of Our Learning Processes**

Each time we accept stimulus into our system, our bodies, brains, and minds are under stress to read the situation and react or respond in a manner that at the very least keeps us safe and at the very most brings us success in the completion of the task we have undertaken.



Our Use First and Avoid patterns also play a significant role in forming how we see and respond to the world around us. They too hold our memory for thinking, doing, and feeling. Unless we become aware of how they shape our response to the world around us, we might allow them to obscure the breadth and depth that all of our patterns bring to us.

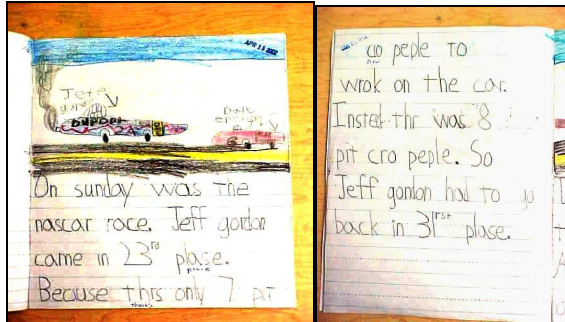
As teachers working with all combinations of learners' learning processes, we too, can find ourselves totally absorbed in the content we are to teach and fail to recognize that the content is secondary to the learners with whom we are seeking to connect to the content!

### **Communicating from the Inside Out: Externalizing Our Internal Talk**

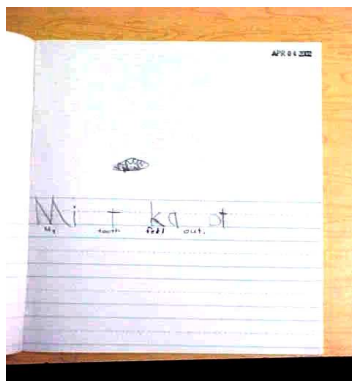
Permit me to give you three examples of how this might occur when we are seeking to develop a students' written expression of their thoughts, feelings, experiences, and ideas.

Let me now show you three young writers (age 5) and their response to the following journal writing prompt: **“Write about something that happened this weekend.”**  
The responses:

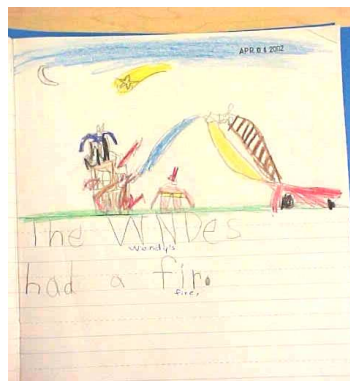
### Child I



### Child II



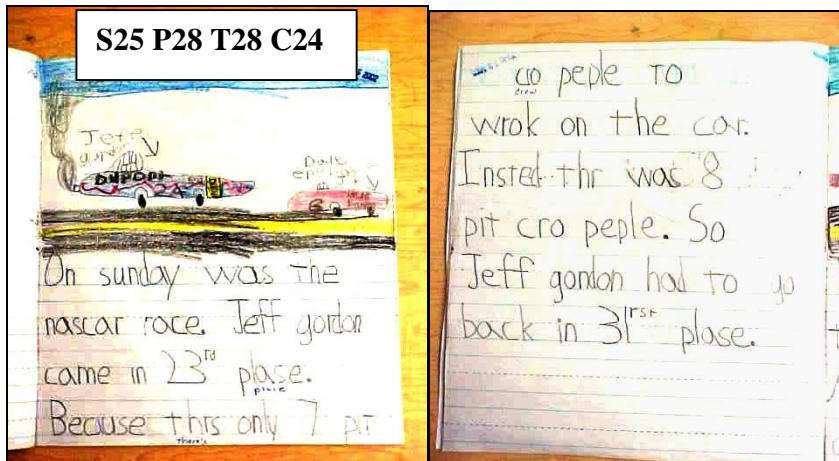
### Child III



Here we see three young writers who have written three very different responses to the same writing prompt. How do we respond as we see each child's work product? How do we use the writing process to engage, coach, mentor, each of these young people? Where can we turn for insights? I, of course, would immediately turn to understanding who each author is as a learner. I would use that as my basis for connecting with the learner and talking about the learner is experiencing as he composes his thoughts. I would consider who is this learner? How is his mind working? How is he processing his thoughts into words? Because I know the learning combinations of these three children, this is what I understand about each:

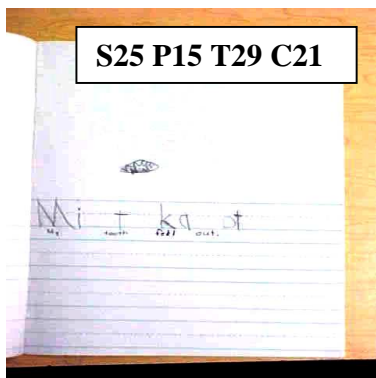
### Learner I

“On Sunday was the nascar race. Jeff gordon came in 23<sup>rd</sup> place. Because thrs only 7 pit cro people to wrok on the car. Insted thr was 8 pit cro people. So Jeff Gordon had to go back to 31<sup>st</sup> place.”



Note the learner's uses of details within the journal entry as well as his labeling of his picture. According to his LCI scores, we understand that this young learner uses Precision, Sequence, Technical Reasoning at a Use First level. He uses confluence As Needed. Because he uses three processes at a Use First level, he is considered a strong willed learner. He will want to work independently and will not respond to Guided Reading techniques in the same manner as a learner who only uses Technical Reasoning First.

## Learner II



“Mi t ka ot” (My tooth came out) “

According to this learner's LCI, he Avoids Precision and uses Technical Reasoning first. He is not interested in telling the details of what happened in his life over the past weekend. That is private. He will communicate the one “action” that truly affected him, and that is, his tooth came out. He felt that; he experienced that; and he may even have helped make it happen. To understand the importance of this to the learner, you can look at his shark-like illustration of a mouth with a tooth missing. No words or labels in this picture, just the cold, hard unadulterated fact. The tooth came out!

However, this learner's LCI scores suggest that he uses not only Technical but Sequence Processing at a Use First level. To help this young learner develop his literacy skills, the teacher will want to focus on developing a strong one-on-one relationship built on trust and respect for the learner's interest in specific reading materials and topics. The teacher

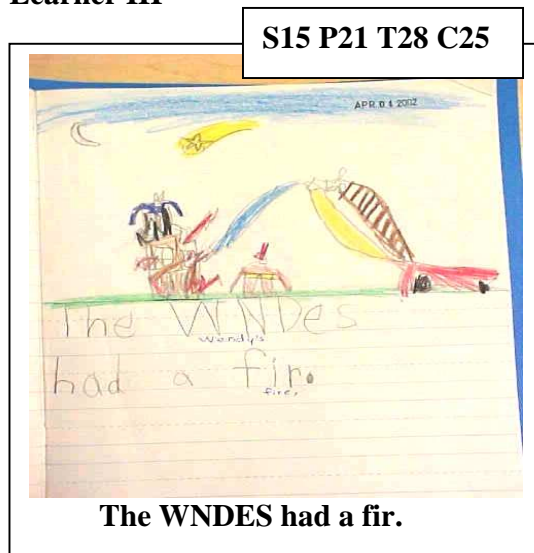
will want to use step-by-step procedures relying on actual physical representations of sounds, letters and words to encourage the learner to build and construct words, sentences, and paragraphs. Allowing the learner to “think aloud” when working one-on-one can be another effective technique.

At times the teacher will need to step back to allow the learner to solve some literacy challenges and fix his strategies.

Most importantly, the teacher should not misperceive the child’s ability to learn simply because he isn’t a word smith or a rapid responder who asks lots of questions and seeks to answer just as many.

This learner can help the teacher grow in his/her understanding of diverse approaches to learning.

### Learner III



This learner’s LCI indicates he uses Technical Reasoning and Confluence First, but unlike Learner II, he does not Avoid Precision. He uses it within the As Needed range. This can be noted in the amount of detail he puts into his picture of the Wendy’s Restaurant as he imagined it was rescued from total destruction by the local fire department. The coloration and manner in which he captured the fire department’s actions reflect this use of imaginative flare. His picture stands in contrast to the black and white pencil drawing of Learner II and the highly detailed and carefully labeled drawing of Learner I.

However, in the case of this learner, he Avoids Sequence. Therefore, for him repetition, practice, practice, practice, and following step-by-step directions is painful, tedious, and a turn-off. This learner will respond best if the teacher allows him to play with sound, letters, and words along with doing one-on-one Guided Practice during which the teacher may need to allow the learner to divert from the teacher’s focus from time-to-time to allow his Confluence and Technical to have some breathing space.

### Communicating from the Inside Out: Considering the Effects of Learning Patterns on Writing

What we cannot afford to do is ignore the learning patterns of the children who are entrusted into our keeping. It is imperative that we recognize that while words are *not* the tool of the individual who uses technical reasoning first that does not mean we can leave

that learner, that potential author wallowing in a pattern struggle. No, when we hear “I don’t know how to say it so I write nothing”, or “I don’t have any more to say” we can now understand that this is the technical processing of the child, the learner, the author coming forward, and we will need to coach that individual from the perspective of “How can you *build* a sentence? How can you *construct* a paragraph using the building blocks of sentences? How can you select just the right word to *make the wall of thought* hold together tightly, smoothly? How can you use the *mortar* of transitional words to *cement* the flow of thought. Too concrete? Yes, the pun is intended! I repeat, too concrete. Not at all! In fact, you may want to use blocks within the classroom just for the purpose of building a structure, attaching words and sentences to it, and then deconstruct it so that the learner can see “hands-on” what is necessary for a thought, a feeling, an experience, or an idea to be conveyed successfully to another.

Other learner’s patterns can cause them the same challenge. The individual who is high in the use of precision-words, facts, and dates- wants to say everything; wants to spell everything correctly the first time; wants perfection, not a draft, not a revisiting of the written product. Or that same learner might fixate on a specific word and not continue to work until he or she has the exact word. Precision lock! Or that learners might keep correcting and correcting and editing and revising and not be willing to submit the work for peer review because his/her precision keeps him or her captive with the quiet internal talk of “Is it correct? If it isn’t perfect, I don’t want anyone else to see it.”

Individuals who are high in their use of sequence want to see samples? Why? To copy. I dare say, “No.” They need to see a sample because they need to see a pattern of what it is they are seeking to achieve. Young writers will follow the sample closely. These learners need to discuss with others how they are progressing. They need reassurance more than correction. As they develop more and more experience with samples, they will begin to accrue a number of different templates upon which they can draw from their long term declarative memory. They can also be challenged to alter the submission ever so slightly at first until they recognize that different is okay.

Those higher in confluence will need to find a focus, an anchor, a thesis, a central defining thought to which they return. They must not elope with every idea that flits through their minds. In order to hold the line they need an employment strategy. What sentence, phrase, or word will I employ to convey my thoughts? I suggest to writers higher in confluence that in order to get into a “groove” and stay in that groove, they need to become discriminating users of the language and carefully screen those ideas that seek employment within their paragraph or composition. How to do this with a learner who is both high in confluence and precision? Interview each thought. Role play the following with them: Ask, “Do you have any previous work experience? Have I used you before effectively? What specific talent do you bring to this sentence? Paragraph? Will you fit in well with the rest of the ‘employed’ sentences?”

### **Communicating from the Inside Out: Failing to Recognize the Effects of Learning Processes on External Communication**

What we cannot do is reach fallacious conclusions that under estimate what our learners, our young writers can do. Simply because some students do not articulate their thoughts quickly does not mean that they can't use their mental operations to develop written expression.

Here is a classic example of what I am referring to. The writer of these thoughts was described by her teachers as a very nice young girl. Quiet. Somewhat aloof, but very sweet., Extremely mannerly. A child who followed instructions although rarely offered to answer questions. She seemed to stay quietly within her own world. These are the patterns of the young woman who at age 14 wrote the passage which is seen below:

I saw emptiness clearly.  
She was hollow and frail.  
I saw her shapeless form.  
She turned and tried to clasp the air  
around her.  
It was then that I heard the release of a  
soundless cry.

Sequence 24 Precision 09 Technical Reasoning 28 Confluence 30

The same year she authored the following:

Treasured scrapes  
A faded blue party dress, a calico apron,  
Reminiscing, cherishing, abiding  
Warm comforting, soft, secure  
Clipping, pricking, stitching  
A colorful memento, an expression of love  
QUILT

At age 16, this young person who avoids precision and uses technical reasoning and confluence first, published her work and illustrations in a monograph entitled, "The World in Words." Dear friends of writing, this same young woman ultimately scored a perfect score on her "high stakes" ninth grade entrance exam. Why, because she had been allowed to develop her writing using her personal learning processes. She had been nurtured in a learning environment that respected her as a learner and allowed her to develop her self expression through her learning processes. She was affirmed, coached, and encouraged not re-configured, brought into line, or "schooled until she bent to meet common performance standards." And that has made all the difference.

A similar story is that of Diana Randolph who lives in the state of Wisconsin in the US amidst dense forests, tall pines, and terrain that experiences the bitterest of snow-filled cold terrain. Diana, born in New Jersey on the US east coast, was a student who couldn't seem to find herself. After high school she attempted to continue her education but soon realized that she was not invested in that pursuit. On a whim, after seeing pictures of the rugged North Central area of the Upper Great Lakes, she purchased an airline ticket and flew off to explore. As she later writes, "I have never looked back." Her writing expresses both the issues of diversity, the need to value differences, and the tolerance to learn to use words at one's own pace. Her learning processes reflect a strong-willed learner who easily might have gone head to head with her teachers and who would not be willing accept direction or criticism.

Let me stand in the light of a poet,  
In the nurturing warmth of words  
So I may learn to catch some phrases  
from the dark blue waters and my constricted voice  
will expand.

Her patterns explain her pioneering spirit, her self-sufficiency, and her determination to develop her use of language to express her deepest thoughts. Knowing Diana's patterns opens a world of understanding to her family, her friends, and her readers.

A world famous author also strong-willed in terms of his three Use First learning processes, received much the same nurturing as the young author whose work we first explored. E.E. Cummings from the age of six began to express himself through artwork drawn along the margins of letters he was writing home from camp. The columnar style of letter placement for which he became famous (or infamous) appeared as his trademark early on. His rebellion against capitalization, punctuation, and basic rules of formatting, suggest that he clearly used both his precision to achieve exactness and his confluence to break the rules of writing and explore the possibilities of double entendre both through word and graphic representation.

The powerful message of loneliness- "a leaf falls" is created by the stark contrast between the words themselves and the clustered effect of a crowd of letters meandering down the page together.

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Both the message and the medium suggest that Cummings used his sequence juxtaposed with his confluence to create a visually fractured flow. Meanwhile his precision and technical reasoning joined forces to build a set of thoughts expressed through both form and function.

As a teacher, how would you react to an E.E. Cummings in your classroom?

### **Communicating from the Inside Out: Identifying Resources to Assist the Learner**

Twenty minutes ago I laid out an elaborate and detailed list of interactions which have to work collaboratively in order for the mind-brain-language-recording-writing process to occur. That was rather overwhelming. Now I have added even greater complexity by suggesting that patterned processes which so affect our writing performance must also be taken into consideration. What is a writing teacher to do? The words of Kahlil Gibran seem to me to be the most appropriate response:

Then said a teacher, Speak to us of Teaching.  
And he said:  
If the teacher is indeed wise he does not bid you  
enter the house of his wisdom,  
but rather leads you to the threshold of your own  
mind.  
Kahlil Gibran  
The Prophet

- Know your learning patterns
- Identify your students' learning patterns
- Celebrate the potential of all learning patterns
- Create a learner profile based upon each student's combination of learning patterns
- Coach the learner's development of personal learning/writing strategies

“How do I implement his advice? you ask. “How can I learn more about the effects of learning processes on the writing process?” Here is the good news. Right here within your midst in Malta is the resource to help you gain a more complete understanding of learning and writing connection.

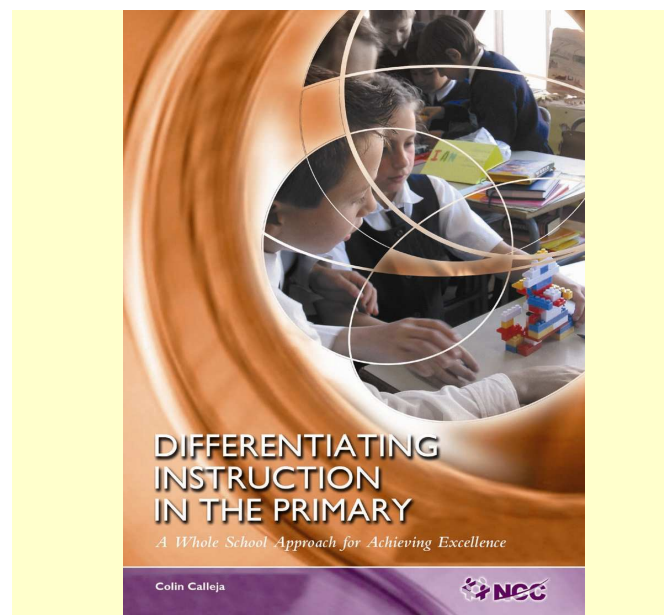
**Contact**

[www.letmelearnmalta.com](http://www.letmelearnmalta.com)

**The LML Training Programme**



or begin your development of your understanding by doing some reading on the topic:



### **Communicating from the Inside Out: Closing Thoughts**

My hope is that the insights I have offered will enhance your knowledge and skills while increasing your commitment to help all learners grow in their ability to formulate a written expression of their human experience.

I would like to conclude this presentation with the words of Diana Randolph, the author I spoke of earlier, and who, as a student, was not seen as an achiever. Yet here her words

so eloquently to the message of Let Me Learn and the work of the National Writing Project:

We are all sources of light,  
Dipping into the same pool of inspiration,  
Brightening each others lives  
By what we create best.

Let me stand in the light of a poet,  
In the nurturing warmth of words  
So I may learn to catch some phrases  
from the dark blue waters and my constricted voice  
will expand.

In the Heart of the Forest  
1999

Diana Randolph  
A Learner/Writer/Artist  
Who Found Her Way  
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