“Sentence Soapbox” is a small strategy used in our community literacy class to engage our students at the start of each session. Though extremely and almost embarrassingly simple, it has become cemented as a weekly ritual into the classes - to the point where if withdrawn, it would be greatly missed.

The process started when we realised that the necessary “venting” by students, each week, prior to class, started leaching into our limited teaching time. We tried restricting each person to one minute (timing this with a talking clock) – each person sharing his or her activities or gripes experienced during the week.

Have you ever tried limiting a garrulous student or tutor to one minute?

Our class has always maintained an open communication approach, ensuring that everyone has a voice, and we encourage verbal interaction. So, how to manage this but also incorporate this into a reading and writing exercise at the same time?

The K.I.S.S. Principle
Simple is the key.

We came up with an incredibly simple solution, yet one that was quite effective in a number of ways.
Each class participant (tutors as well as students) is asked to write just one sentence about their week onto a piece of paper. It must be a properly constructed sentence, and it needs to be written in a way that disguises the writer.

**Examples**

“I know three people who had there birthday in this month”  
(Reader analysis: “there” should be “their”.)

“I didn’t go skinny-dipping, because I was wearing too many clothes in the cold weather.”  
(No analysis needed!)

The new Lyon Ritchie ad is good.  
(Reader analysis: spelling of Lionel is difficult.)

Mum and I are going to the Ekka on Monday, and we looked at caravans in Burpengary.  
(Reader analysis: discuss time order for events, past - present - future.)

“I enjoy the Multicultural lunch. It will be held every 1st Sunday in each month.”  
(Reader analysis: Enjoyed – past tense needed.)

“I am going to Brisbane today and will see my friends on Sunday.”

“I watched Slide Show last Wensday night.”  
(Reader analysis: Wed-nes-day.)

These sentences are then distributed around the room so that each person holds someone else’s sentence. A person is selected to start. They read the sentence, and everyone else must guess the author. The reader critiques the sentence, for example by commenting on the appropriate use of grammar.

Once the author has been identified, that person then reads the sentence he or she has been given and so on until all the sentences have been read.

This process can take a while, but it does satisfy the elements of reading, writing, listening and speaking – important components of communicating - and everyone seems to love it as they start thinking and writing as soon as they arrive.

Sentences range from the hilarious to poignant and all shades in between. It gives even the most reluctant public speaker a voice and they don’t shy away from it at all.

I involve tutors in activities such as this as it has the obvious benefits of flattening out the perceived “them and us” imbalance. Many a tutor has been caught out in sentence construction problems such as omitting full-stops.

I also like students to see exactly what every-day literacy really is, by removing its ‘professional mystique’.
“Sentence Soapbox” can also be extended, depending on needs. One example we have used is to return all sentences to the original authors, and then encourage them to expand these sentences into a larger story. Students are asked to talk through the story and have the tutor write down what is being said. This is then checked, read and re-written by the student.

The strategy we use may be summarised as: Talk. Write. Read. Review.

1. TALK:
   - Ask the student to read out the sentence again.
   - Explore and expand on the background to the sentence with questioning etc.

2. WRITE:
   - Write down exactly what the student is saying – as best as possible.
   - Prompt as much as possible if the student seems shy or unsure of words to use etc.

3. READ:
   - Ask the student to read what has been written.
   - Pick up on difficult words – spelling, pronunciation etc, and talk these through.
   - With difficult spellings, re-write these as a list on a separate page.

4. REVIEW:
   - Talk more about whether anything more could be added or changed?
   - Have the student re-write what has been written, expanding ideas.

Tommy, a student from a non-English speaking background, recently wrote a support letter for a funding application and remarked on the value of our Sentence Soapbox:

Why I love literacy class.
It has been part of my life to attend the literacy class regularly. There are two reasons: one is to learn English and the other is to learn computer. I found it interesting to do the brain gym and the sentence. Brain gym give us some exercise for our body as well as our brain. The sentence let us read and write and understand members’ life, interest and all sorts of happenings. I reckon it is a wonderful idea to do so to start the class. Looking forward to continue our class – so interesting and lively.
WHY I DO WHAT I DO.......... 
ADULT LITERACY COMMUNITY 
CLASSES

I have co-ordinated and taught a weekly adult literacy class at Caloundra Community Centre, Sunshine Coast, since 2001. Our funding sources may have waxed and waned over the years, but not so the eagerness of an enormously diverse range of students and volunteer tutors.

Our policy is to welcome all students, regardless of skill levels, and incorporate all aspirations into a cohesive community class through which all participants may benefit.

A lofty ambition – and sometimes it works!

Literacy to me is all about choice. If we’re not able to read, our ability to absorb and comprehend, in any meaningful way, the extraordinary volume of information that assails our senses is denied. How do we decide which apples are the best value if we can’t decipher our junk-mail brochures?

Language and communication are intrinsic to our environment and to our very cultural identity - asking for help in improving our literacy skills is so soul baring.

How challenging must the whole process be for someone who has missed out on opportunities for gaining literacy skills? How daunting it must be for someone recognising a need for assistance with reading and writing, and approaching classes and/or a tutor for the first time.

I love the work we do in adult literacy, because I’m constantly learning. Could I ask that all tutors do a soul-searching themselves and try to avoid taking on a patronising ‘do-gooding’ aura? Everybody on this planet has capabilities and qualities in differing areas. Ours just happens to be in the literacy field. And if we have the skills to assist others in successfully manoeuvring through our information-filled world, and provide opportunities to aid in the decision-making process, then power to us all.

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Part of our terrific team of tutors and students. They agreed to have the photo published. Photo by Rachel Lancaster