

Break The Welfare Cycle: Let Writers Choose Their Topics

Donald H. Graves
Department of Education
The University of New Hampshire

A seventh-grade teacher left a writing workshop one Wednesday afternoon filled with renewed optimism, only to return seven days later with that tarred-and-feathered look. She was a bit hostile to boot when she reported: "I told my class they could choose any subject they wished for their writing assignment this week. Well, you'd think I'd asked them to undress in public." She glanced accusingly at me: "That was a pretty dumb suggestion . . . letting them choose their own topics. Some asked for a list of good topics. Others asked outright, 'What topics do *you* like best?' Still others complained, 'Our topics are dumb.' Finally they pleaded, 'You give us the topics.'" Apparently murder is preferable to hari kari.

By the time most children reach seventh grade, they are unable to choose topics. Their inability is both a serious symptom and an indicator of many of their problems as young writers: They can't choose topics because they believe writing is an artificial act disconnected from their own lives.

Writing becomes artificial because we teachers make it so. From the time children are in second grade we prevent them from learning to choose topics. In response to our system they go on *writer's welfare*, depending on their teacher, first for the topics of their writing, and eventually for the content and shape of their writing as well. As teachers, we foster their dependency with reasoning that seems to go like this: "Children are afraid to write; worse yet they come to the page with nothing of significance to write about. We'll take care of their problems by giving them topics to write about."

The welfare experience begins. Children are fed diets of snappy gimmicks — story starters, stimulating pictures, "dial-a-story" games, opening paragraphs, open-ended stories to complete, as well as teachers' favorite topics.

It doesn't have to be this way.

Children bring rich experiences and voices to the blank pages we place before them. In fact, children themselves show us much not only about topics but also about how we can help them become better writers. Supported by a three-year grant from the National Institute of Education, Susan Sowers, Lucy Calkins and I have studied the composing processes of young children from ages six through ten. One small sector of our data dealing with the topics of children's writing is reported here. My purpose in reporting

on this data is to demonstrate the importance for children's writing of their choice of topics as well as the implications of these choices for those of us who teach writing.

Choice And Voice

Topics come easily to six-year-olds. They write about personal experiences, fantasies, and information they learn from books about prehistoric animals, weapons, weather, and The sources seem unending. The children are confident; their voices boom through the print.

Unfortunately, for too many, these happy days don't last. Developmental issues intrude. Somewhere between grades one and three, children become aware of the intrusion of audience. The audience includes the children themselves. Children find that other children as well as the teacher react differently to their writing than they do themselves. Until this time children suppose others both interpret their writing and register the same feelings about their writing as they do.

A sense of audience is intensified as these young writers develop as readers. Good readers can be overheard complaining about a book they're reading, "This is dumb. I don't know what to say about this stuff. What's a good subject to write about?" At this stage children's critical skills outweigh their ability to produce texts satisfying to themselves. They look for help. But instead of giving help, we teachers introduce them to the welfare cycle. We ignore their resources.

If we were to help our students, we would lead them back to their resources — to their individual territories, information, and voice. To help students is to encourage them to speak and write about their topics. When teachers help children to speak about their own topics and how they would compose them, young writers find renewal and discovery in the sound of their voices. They hear new information in their own words because teachers listen, reflect, and question them in such ways that they recognize that they are teaching their teachers about what they know. The children in our study in New Hampshire constantly spoke about their writing in formal and informal conferences. Note the voices, sense of process, and control of information in these words of two nine-year-old children as they speak about their topics:

Andrea: *I think I saw "Little White Fish Jumped All Around Us" and I realized – How big are they? Why white? What did they look like? And I realized probably my whole story is like that – blah! Like I have, "I pressed my toes in hot sand." What was it like? How did it feel? So I'm going to do a whole new draft, rather than fix it up. I'll sort of follow along with the other draft, but in my own words.*

Brian: *When I write about the cat and the car running over it, it came to my mind. When we were riding down North Broadway and we saw a burning car . . . I could describe the car burning up – it was a Pontiac, burning the night. Hey, a title! "Flames in the Night!"*

Although both children encounter problems, they articulate processes to solve them. Andrea is highly critical of her piece about the fish but isn't discouraged. She'll do a new draft. Brian discovers a new topic and title in the midst of writing another. These children speak this way only because their teachers have given them responsibility for their topics and help to deal with issues in their drafts.

Topic Choice Helps The Writing

When writers know that the choice of the topics of their writing is theirs, and when they write at least four times a week, they think about topics when they are not writing. One of the significant findings in our study was the quantity of "off-stage" thinking done by children who felt they controlled their topics. When a six-year-old boy, John, found a bat with his father on a Saturday, he rehearsed both the topic and some of the text before he wrote about it the following Monday morning. John knew he could rediscover what happened in the event on Saturday by writing about it. He also knew that time would be provided for him to rediscover the event and write about it when he got to class. In another instance, nine-year-old Amy, who is interested in foxes, chose them for a topic. The night before she was to write, Amy rehearsed the lead to her fox piece for herself.

Children who write regularly and are permitted to choose their own topics are seldom without a topic. Their writing folders contain lists of "future" topics — topics that grow out of their reading, their conversations with other children, their experiences, or their questions. In the course of writing about one topic, inevitably other more interesting topics arise. For these children, some topics are simply saved for another day.

Teachers in our study expressed sincere interest in the topics and information about which students wrote. The teachers interviewed the children about the content and topics of their writing; the children were responsible for teaching their teachers about what they knew. This procedure produced two situations. As writers developed:

1. More problems related to the information in the writing which are usually handled in second or third drafts were dealt with at the point of choosing the topic.
2. The number of drafts students wrote diminished.

The Switch From Choice To Assignment

Writing is, after all, a tool for learning. It is meant to be used in mathematics, science, and social science. It is *not* the exclusive property of personal narrative, fiction, or poetry. Teachers need to use writing as a means of learning; therefore, sometimes the content of their writing will be assigned to students. Even though the content for children's writing assignments in the primary years grows out of children's own choices of topics as it should, the switch from writing about personal topics to writing about assigned topics is easily effected in a very brief period of time. Consider how this shift occurred for the students we studied.

By the second year of our study, many of the eight-year-olds had considerable experience in choosing the topics of their writing and composing pre-writing drafts to clarify their subjects. During the second half of that year, the teacher moved the children in the study toward writing about prescribed content. The switch from personal writing to writing about science and the social studies was barely perceptible. The children were required to use more resources, to conduct interviews, and to learn how to take notes, but the actual composing required of the children in the new genre was little different from their personal writing. These children already knew what it meant to provide supporting information for their claims, to organize toward meaning, to express their topics in precise language.

Choice And Responsibility

Children learn through the choices they make. At the outset of their experience as writers, students' first choices, even second and third ones, are often poor. Fred wants to write about "space," but he is swallowed up by the enormity of his choice. With help, Fred finds he knows more about the "space shuttle" than he does about "space." He begins to learn the power of limits, the meaning of choice.

Our data show: Children learn and benefit from choice; they think about writing when they are not writing; and they learn the meaning of choice by thinking of the information which forms their topics. They find it easier to learn to revise when writing about themes which are personally important to them because there is more depth to their understanding of their topics. They learn to put themselves into their pieces because they have learned to explain and sup-

port the information that developed their topics: They learn the meaning of voice.

We need to break the teaching cycle that places young people on **writer's welfare**. Children won't learn if we think

for them. We want students to talk and write as if they know their subjects because they do know their subjects. We want independent learners and thinkers. We want independent writers. Independence begins for writers when they choose their topics.