

First-grade Writers Who Pursue Reading

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Everyone knows writing is hard except children who are just beginning first grade. Twenty-three of them were asked, "Can you write?"

"Yes," answered every child.

"Can you read?"

Only two children said, "Yes."

Then the children were given journals and they wrote.

On September 17 Susan, who had said earlier she couldn't read, wrote:

MIMOMISHBE

BKIKRO

When she showed it to someone else she said, "I bet you can't read this, but I can. I wrote it. Want me to read it to you? My mom is happy because I can read. "

Susan is part of a case-study research project on the relationship between reading and writing which three of us--Ellen Blackburn (the teacher), Don Graves, and I--began during the 1981-1982 school year and will continue during the 1982-83 school year. In 1981-82, Don and I spent part of three days each week in Ellen's classroom in Great Falls School, located in a lower-middle class community in Somersworth, New Hampshire, an old New England mill town, studying three children who represented low, middle, and high achievement levels. We collected data about the reading and writing of these children on video and audio tapes, protocol forms, and in notes taken during frequent interactions and conferences with the children.

In order to make the relationship between reading and writing as obvious as possible to the children, we gave identical

definitions to both reading and writing and created similar learning environments for their reading and writing periods in class: We defined both reading and writing as the process of composing a message; and during reading and writing periods in class, Ellen Blackburn expected the students to assume responsibility for their work. She taught them to make decisions, and as they gained knowledge about making decisions in writing and reading their sense of responsibility grew and they pursued messages. Their perseverance started with their writing: They wrote and learned about the processes in which they engaged as they composed messages (Graves, 1982). The same applied to reading: During the reading period, they all had stories in front of them for the entire period.

In this class, students are provided frequent opportunities to read and write, and they interact with others as they read and write so they may gain feedback in order to improve. The classroom buzzes during reading sessions just as it does during writing sessions: Randy chooses to read with Carlos. Susan chooses to read with a group of friends. Marie curls up in a corner by herself. Ellen Blackburn has a group with her--a group of students of mixed reading levels who have chosen to read together. This interaction is important because beginning readers need a lot of help; and they need to get much of that help from each other, since the teacher alone cannot answer all their questions.

During times when she meets with groups, Ellen Blackburn teaches students to confer with each other the way she confers with them. She teaches them four types of interactions, or conferences, which I will describe separately although they do not occur discretely.

Initiating Conferences

An initiating conference occurs when children need to get started. They may need help in choosing topics for writing or selecting books to read. Each time they come to the writing table or each time the reading period begins, they decide whether to continue with texts they are currently working on or to choose new ones. For example, when children choose stories they may stay with them until the stories flow; or, if their choices are inappropriate, they may put the stories aside. This practice is posited upon the assumption that when children choose the topics of their writing or the stories they will read, they have an investment in the pieces: There is a message they want to create, and they persist until they have done so.

One day Toby consulted George about his writing:

T: "Should I write about sledding or my new goldfish?"

G: "You have a new goldfish? Where did you get it?"

T: "My memere got it for me. You should see the aquarium it has. Maybe I'll write about that."

G: "Yeah, our whole class went sledding so everyone knows about that topic already."

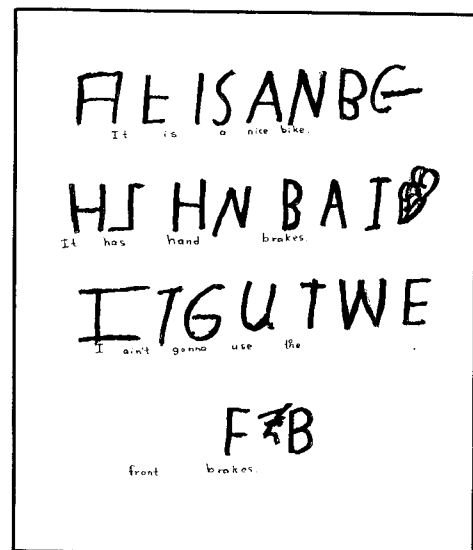
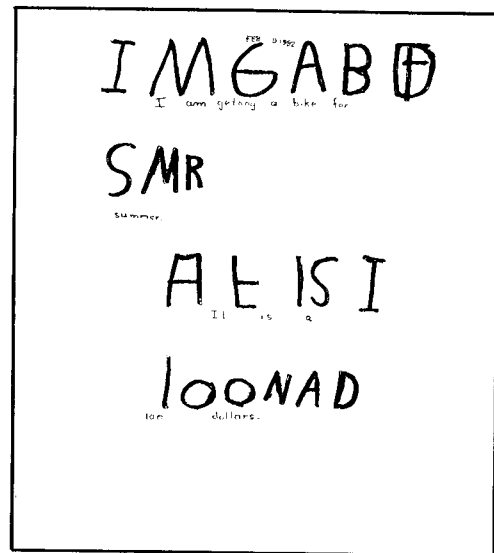
Toby chose the topic of his writing—which could just as easily have been the topic of his reading—by consulting with a classmate. And the teacher honored the choice.

Comprehension Conferences

A comprehension conference helps children clarify messages. Such interactions

begin when children read texts to others. The initial responses are focused on the content of the piece.

One day Carlos had just written this piece and read it to me:



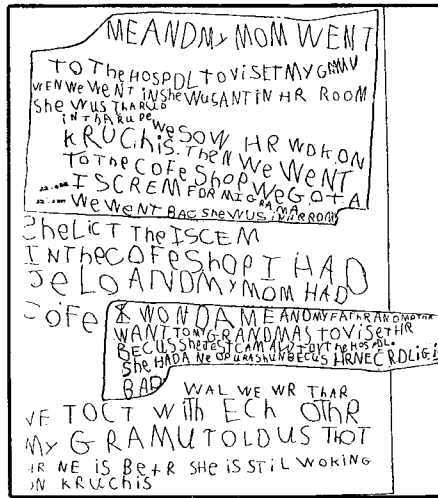
As he touched another piece of paper he said, "I can't decide if I should add some more information to it."

Referring to his text, I asked why he had written that he would never use the front brakes. He explained that he might be thrown off if he did. I told him I didn't know that because I don't know much about dirt bikes, and I wondered if it would be important information to add.

"I'm going to go talk to Jamie," he responded. "He has a dirt bike so he knows a lot about them." The responsibility for making the decision about what to do with his text rested with Carlos. He would seek advice, and he would decide.

Because the children in this class want their messages to be clear, they seek conferences until they are satisfied with their pieces. They approach their writing as something that can be revised as it emerges. They know their "drafts" improve their messages.

I happened to walk by Jon one day after he had written most of the text in Figure 2 about his grandma's knee operation.



I noticed he had cut his original story apart, pasted it on another sheet of paper, and had added new information in the middle as well as at the end. I asked Jon why he had cut apart his original story.

"Well, it didn't sound right."

"How did you know?"

"You see, when I read my first draft to Ms. Blackburn, then she read it back to me and it sounded funny."

"What sounded funny about it?"

"I had said we visited my grandma at her house and we visited her in the hospital, but we had visited her in the hospital FIRST, so I had to cut it apart and put that part first!"

No one told Jon to reorganize his piece. After all reorganization is a lot of work. Jon chose to reorganize himself because he was determined to make his message right. Just as the teacher gives these children initial control in the choice of their topics, she is careful not to take responsibility for an emerging text away from them.

The task of constructing meaning is not restricted to writing in this classroom. Rereading is as prevalent as rewriting. Children who get bogged down the first time through a story and find the message muddy frequently choose to reread; often they reread books many times.

One day Marie had just finished a book and approached me with a dejected look, "It ended funny."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't get it."

We talked about the book and because she couldn't explain it to her satisfaction, she reread it with a friend. By the time they finished the two of them were involved in a discussion about what it meant. I listened.

Skills Conferences

Skills conferences in reading and writing occur when they are needed and only after the individual writer or reader is satisfied with the content of a piece.

Don Graves conducted a skills conference in writing with Susan one day when he saw she had used quotation marks and parentheses.

"What do those marks mean, Susan?"

"Well, these (pointing to the quotation marks) are what you use when kids talk and these (parentheses) are what you use when grown-ups talk."

Because students write freely, concentrating on their messages and not worrying about spelling or parentheses, they are able to create texts.

The skills conferences in reading, like those in writing, place the skills in context. In a skills conference the teacher helps the children apply appropriate word attack skills to their texts. For example, the teacher may encourage a child who remembers seeing a word he cannot now identify to thumb back through the book to find it on a preceding page where he did read it. Sometimes children recognize a word as one they used in their writing but cannot identify it.

I was with Randy one day when he came across the word what. He couldn't identify it but said it was in one of his stories. He got his writing folder, found the appropriate story among four in the folder, found the right page, noted the word, and went back to his book. This took ten minutes, but he did not feel rushed. He wanted to figure the problem out for himself. Like the other children in the class, he had confidence in his ability to learn how to read.

Process Conference

The process conferences provide the thread that runs through all of the conferences. Although initiating, comprehension, skills, and process conferences may occur at different times, the teacher weaves process questions into all of them. The teacher does so to encourage children to talk about what they are doing in order to learn. If children are to take the responsibility for their learning, they need to recognize why and how they make decisions about their learning activities. Their teacher's questions to them about the processes in which they engage helps them to learn why and how they make decisions as well as why and how they might make better ones.

In writing conferences they talk about what makes a good topic or in reading conferences, about what would be a good

book to choose. They learn that writers write best when they write about something they know well. They know that writing begins with having something to write about; therefore, they think about writing on Saturdays, for example, when their family goes bottle digging. Some of the titles of their writing illustrate their topics: My Cold, Watching My Baby Sister Get Born, My Cousin Lisa, My Dad's Truck, My Broken Arm and My Loose Tooth.

When I asked one of the children what makes a good writer, the answer was, "Someone who does lots of things. I don't mean in school. We all do the same things in school. I mean on the weekends."

Similarly, these students choose their reading materials and reading method with an awareness of their needs. They select their reading materials--their own stories, the published stories of other children, basals, trade books, and books at the listening center--based upon their current interests. Often they choose to learn how to read stories they have heard before:

"Why did you pick 'Rabbit and Skunk'?"

"Because Amanda read it to me so I know the story. It helps to learn the words if you know the story."

As they evolve their own plans for their own reading programs, they plan with three books on their mind--one they can read well and enjoy reading over and over again; one they are working on; and one they intend to learn to read next. They know that in order to learn how to read they need to review, practice new stories, and try harder ones. And they decide when to read alone, when to read with a partner, and when to read in a group. If a child intends to learn how to read a new story and thinks it will be somewhat difficult, he often wisely chooses to read with a partner.

Children in this classroom talk about why different people understand things differently.

One day Randy explained how terrible the child in a story must have felt, "Well, I know of a time when I felt sad, and I REALLY felt sad."

"When was that?"

"When my dad moved out."

Another boy told a sad story about when his family used to live in Alaska. Then a third boy told about how he gets upset when his little sister messes up his things. Finally I asked Randy whether all children would be thinking about the same things when they read. Of course, he said they wouldn't; and of course, I asked why not. He answered, "Because different things happen to all of us so the stories mean different things to all of us."

Within their skills conferences the children are also encouraged to talk about how to use the skills they are learning.

One day when Susan had chosen to read one of Reggie's published books, Ms. Blackburn asked her, "What will you do if you get stuck?"

"I'll sound it out."

"What will you do if you can't sound it out?"

"Ask Marie (the best reader among the girls)."

"Would you ask George?"

"Yep. He wrote it so he SHOULD know the words."

Because these children are in an environment where everyone talks, writes, and reads they pursue composing with zest. It's the thing to do. They approach blank pieces of paper with ideas and they approach books with ideas. Print is accessible to them. They know where it comes from. The words on the pages of books are someone's story. That author

has something to share. It is probably interesting and it would be fun to find out what it is.

One day Randy had read The Three Little Pigs to me from his basal. I asked him what he planned to learn how to read next.

"I don't know," he answered softly and wandered off across the room. Later, when I was leaving for the day, he cornered me, "I'm planning what I want to learn to read next. I'll have something to read to you next time you come."

The next time I arrived he greeted me, "Hey Mrs. Hansen, I have a book I'm learning how to read!"

When he finished More Spaghetti, I say! I asked, "Are you going to continue learning how to read this or are you going to go on to something else?"

"Oh, I'm going to finish learning how to read this. I don't know it too good yet. Then I'll learn how to read some others. You know Mrs. Hansen, there are only three months of school left!"

A few days later, Randy sought me out in the classroom, "I can read it excellent now. Wanna hear it?"

REFERENCES

Graves, Donald. Writing: Teachers and Children at Work. Exeter, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1982.

Describes the writing process as it evolves in children who write frequently in classrooms taught by teachers interested in the writing process.

