

Reykjavik, June 2012

What Reading Gives to Writing:

Helping children compose written language

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Four pieces by four children

I woke up. I heard a knock on the door and I saw a lion at the door. I let it in. He had tea with me and he had to go home.

Fred, aged 6 years (spelling and punctuation amended)

What has Fred learned about writing?

- *to construct grammatically complete sentences*
- *to use co-ordinated clauses as well as simple sentence structures*
- *to give his whole text a shape*
- *to construct a story*

Once upon a time there lived a king and queen who very, very much wanted a baby of their own. One day the queen was hanging the washing out when she felt a pain. She fell to the ground weeping. Her husband, who was busy making dinner, called and called, but nobody came. He rushed outside to see what was wrong. There he found his wife weeping.

*Then he heard a voice. "King do not worry!" It was the kind voice of God. He was sending a message. Your wife is *** with a baby. You must take her to the hospital. Then slowly the voice faded away.*

The man looked down at his wife. He picked her up in his arms and carried her inside. He laid her on a golden settee and he called the hospital. Soon an ambulance came. They lifted the queen onto a bed and the man sat on a stool next to her in the ambulance. He held her hand. When they arrived they carried her out onto the path and took her into the hospital. There they did an injection to the woman and soon she was ready to have the baby taken out.. They took the baby out and after a few weeks she was able to go home and they lived happily after.

Charlotte, aged 6 years (spelling and punctuation amended)

Charlotte has learned:

- *to use a rich mixture of sentence structures – simple clauses, co-ordinated subordinated clauses – including non-finite clauses and some non right-branching sentences*
- *to use some mental state verbs*
- *to use a variety of forms of reference, making the text cohere*
- *some of the features of at least three narrative genres*
- *to develop a complex narrative and bring it to a satisfying conclusion*
- *to use language to create vivid visual details*
- *and?*

- **One day at school**

One day I was at school, working in my Maths Group and Miss was helping a different group. I needed help so I put my hand up but she never came. The blood was draining from my arm and finally she came, Miss helped me but I did not understand.

The bell went for home time. On the way home I found a pot. It was a rusty pot, I took the rusty pot home. When I got home I put it on the table and examined it. I took the rusty thing up to my room and cleaned it up.

I rubbed it and a cloud came out of it, the cloud spoke, it was a jenie. The jenie said, "What would you like to be when you are older?" First of all I could not understand it... But when I realised what it had said... I said to the jenie, "I would like to be a professional footballer.

The jenie spoke almost immediately "Your wish is my command!" and then it disappeared in a puff of smoke.

When I was older I did become a professional footballer, "So what the jenie had promised was true!" in the end.

- Peter aged 10 (spelling and punctuation uncorrected)

Peter has learned all the things Fred knows (apart, perhaps, from thematic coherence) and in addition:

- *to make some use of subordination in sentence structure*
- *to use some non right-branching sentences*
- *to use a few mental state verbs*
- *to produce a conventional story, albeit awkwardly connected to the opening*
- *to provide some detail of lived experience*

However, Fred seems perhaps, not to have learned as much as Charlotte

- ***Humble the cat's story***

I heard the wolves again last night, howling at the tops of their voices, long and loud, big and bold. I lay with shivers all over my body.

I went to my secret hunting field just now. I stayed out there for ages.

I came in through the window like the ghost of the cat next door, whose life was meant to end. I've come in for warmth and comfort by the fire and up against the dog.

Alice is fidgeting in her cradle she can smell mouse on me. The dog lies near the fire with her belly facing the centre of the sparks.

I hear noises and turn my head, I thought it might have been Alice, but it was the Dog wandering over to Alice's cradle, wobbling with its belly so big.

I lie, watching Alice lift her small red fists up to stroke the dog's furry ear. I hear more movements. It is the twins, coughing and moving from side to side, at their parent's feet, as children do when they are sleeping. Only Alice is awake, she's lying still, silent and calm; she does not fear the Wolves. Their loud howling voices come to her from far outside the house, which is the only world she knows.

Sophie, aged 10 (spelling and punctuation uncorrected)

In addition to what Charlotte has learned, Sophie has learned to use:

- *a variety of adjectives, giving the text richness and depth*
- *some mental state verbs*
- *extended adverbial clauses of many different types*
- *extended similes*
- *rhythmic and melodious phrasing to add telling detail*

She has also learned to create a sense of foreboding in her description of action, to create a sense of action to come through description of stillness and quiet

Writing is complex and hard

- Engaging in a writing task is as mentally demanding as playing chess.
(Kellogg, 2008).
- Writing involves combining meaning – what the writer wants to say – with the communicative tools and practices available
(Kress , 1997).

In almost any piece of writing the writer has to bring together:

- a sense of what has to be communicated
- a sense of audience
- the explicit language of written text
- an awareness of different types of writing
- a knowledge of punctuation and spelling;
- control of handwriting or digital technology;
- a readiness to review the writing after the first draft, checking for sense, for fitness for purpose and audience, and for technical accuracy.

Transcriptional features and composition

- Spelling, handwriting and punctuation matter. They need to be taught. But they are not my concern here.
- The ability to construct a message also matters and should not be taken for granted.
- Children need to have something to say if they are to invest in learning how to set the words down on the page – and someone to say it to.
- Composing matters, not just as an incentive to learn how to shape letters, spell and punctuate.

What children have to learn to become writers

Children need to learn:

- *an awareness of what writing can do for the writer*
- *to produce the explicit language of written text*

An awareness of what writing can do for the writer

- A felt experience of the range of purposes writing serves, from notes to jog the memory to personal messages, sets of instructions, stories and poems.
Children need to learn how writing weaves through and has the potential to shape a range of experiences and social relationships.
- They need to understand how writing can capture, organise and transcend experience.
- Experience of powerful texts can demonstrate much of this in a compelling way.

The language of written text

- Even children with a good grasp of spoken language, a familiarity with using words to get things done, to recount past events and plan the future, still have to learn written language.
- Written language differs from spoken language in both its form and its function.

Written language:

- is more permanent than talk.
- has to be more explicit.
- can't make use of intonation, facial expression, bodily stance, gesture or shared physical surroundings to aid understanding
- usually has to stand on its own, so the choice of words, their arrangement and punctuation, have to bear a heavy communicative weight.

Even in a picture book, written language uses denser structures

- expanded noun phrases rather than simple ones,
- sentences, varied in structure, rather than loosely connected clause complexes,
- cohesive stretches of text with thematic unity rather than the meanders of conversation.

So learning to write is learning to produce written language as well as learning to put the words down on the page.

Developing writing in the classroom: what does the research tell us?

- One message that comes through many research studies is that if children are to be fully engaged in their learning they need to experience learning to write as interesting, meaningful and purposeful from the start
- This means that they should not be confined to exercises in letter formation in the early stages.
- They should be involved in purposeful activities such as shared story-writing and the exchange of written messages

Effective literacy teachers balance the technical and compositional aspects

- In classrooms where young children learn to write effectively, attention is given to both the learning of the codes of written language and also to the uses and purposes of writing, in ways that are meaningful to the learner (Cunningham and Allington, 1999).
- Effective teachers provide extensive opportunities for their pupils to read and respond to children's literature and to write for a variety of authentic purposes while also attending to the transcriptional features of written language (Block and Pressley, 2000; Pressley et al. 2001).

Effective literacy teachers integrate these aspects of learning to write.

In effective classrooms, attention to technical features is actually *contextualized* in the process of purposeful writing.

- In a study of effective teachers in New York city, Knapp et al. (1995) observed that they teach skills as tools to be used immediately, not items to be learned for their own sake.
- This is borne out by the findings of Medwell et al. (1998) in England, Wilkinson and Townsend (2000) in New Zealand and Loudon et al. (2010) in Australia.

Grammar teaching and writing

Meanwhile the jury is still out on the benefits of explicit teaching of grammatical features related to composition activities in children of primary school age (Myhill et al., 2011).

Fred, Charlotte, Peter and Sophie did not learn to use the grammatical forms they display in their writing through lessons in grammar.

Other approaches found to be beneficial for the teaching of writing

- Focusing on multimedia texts (Bearne et al., 2011),
- Using talk to promote and support writing (Fisher et al., 2011),
- Collaboration with the teacher in the act of composition (Geekie et al., 1999),
- ‘Publishing’ children’s writing and attending to the content of what children write as well as to transcriptional features (Graham et al., 1997)
- Teachers composing texts at their own level (Cremin and Baker, 2010).
- A democratic rather than autocratic order in the classroom, where the shaping of written text takes place within a general atmosphere of tentativeness, negotiation and dialogue (Knapp et al., 1995; Taylor et al., 1999; Chinn et al., 2001).

- But there is one classroom practice that is in danger of marginalisation because it is enjoyable and does not look like work.
- It relies, at least in part, on implicit rather than explicit learning.

Engaging with powerful texts in the classroom

- Studies carried out since the 1960s show that listening to stories read aloud in engaging ways at school has a significant effect on children's vocabulary (Fodor, 1966; Cohen, 1968; Elley, 1989).
- Vivas (1996) shows that, as well as improved vocabulary and story comprehension, reading aloud produces increases in the range of syntactic structures and the width of linguistic activity in the classroom.

How does this happen?

- Researchers with an interest in writing have suggested that as they listen to and discuss stories read aloud, children become familiar with features of the language of written text and begin to use these in their writing (Smith, 1983; Calkins, 1994)., much as they learned the structures of spoken language.
- A number of studies have explored the way in which children's written texts reflect those they have experienced (Cairney, 1990; Sipe, 1993; Pantaleo, 2007).

The teacher's role

- A recent descriptive study of interactive read-alouds in writers' workshop sessions in a third grade class (Manak, 2011) shows explicit discussion led by the class teacher playing an apparently key role.
- As well as reading aloud, she explained the purpose of particular features of the text and also made explicit connections between the students' reading and writing experiences.

The *Power of Reading* Project

- These reading-writing connections are richly demonstrated in the report of *The Power of Reading*, a research project carried by staff at the Centre for Language in Primary Education with teachers of Year 5 classes (9 and 10 year olds) in schools in South and East London (Barrs and Cork, 2001).
- Working with rhythmic and resonant texts, some common to all five classes, the six teachers strove to engage children through:
 - animated reading aloud,
 - dramatisation and
 - related activities, including discussion of key features of the texts.

- Over the year of the project, dramatic changes in the children's writing became evident.
- In all classrooms the literary text had become a source and an inspiration for writing.
- But how the text was used varied across the classrooms.
- Samples of writing from early, mid-way and late in the school year were scored in terms of such countable features as the incidence of mental state verbs and non-right-branching sentences and, through impression marking, such features as narrative voice and literary turns of phrase.
- The teacher's activities most positively associated with improved scores and to writing of high quality were reading and re-reading aloud, intervening and responding to children's texts during the process of writing, and reading their work aloud to them.

- The piece by Sophie on Humble the Cat comes from one of these classes.
- Sophie did not write like that at the start of the project.
- *“Hurry up!” I shouted “We’ll miss the plane”
“Sorry we’re coming” said Georgia and Hollie giggling. We climbed up onto the plane and we all sat down tiredly. Georgia, Hollie, Millie and baby Allyssia were all fast asleep. The aeroplane landed we all got off the plane and made our way to the villa. The next morning we all put our swim suits on grabbed the pool key and a towel and we dived in the lovely swimming pool outside our villa. A strange man appeared at the swimming pool gate put his hand through the gate got our pool key and ran off with it*
- Sophie, aged 9 years

The text that inspired Sophie

Fire, Bed and Bone by Henrietta Brandford tells the story of the Peasants' Revolt from the point of view of a dog. It was listened to, read, explored and enacted by Sophie's class. It opens:

“The wolves came down to the farm last night. They spoke to me of freedom.

I lay by the last of the fire with my four feet turned towards the embers and the last of the heat warming my belly. I did not listen to the wolf talk. This is no time to think of freedom.

Tomorrow in the morning I will choose the place. Out in the byre, where the bedding is deep and the children cannot find me.

My back aches from the pull of my belly. However long I lap from the cold cattle trough I am still thirsty. I think tomorrow is the day.

I rest. The fire ticks. Grindecobbe grunts in her stall. Humble creeps in through the window and curls beside me, soft as smoke.

I can smell mouse on her. She has eaten and has come in to the fire for the warmth.

Rufus snores on his pallet of straw. Comfort, his wife, lies curled around him, dreaming. Down by their feet the children cough and fidget in their sleep, as children do. Only Alice, the baby, is awake. Only she hears with me and Humble, the wild song of the wolves.

I heave my belly up and hobble on splayed feet to stand beside the cradle. Alice reaches her small red fist towards my ear and smiles. She does not fear the wolves. Their voices come to her from far outside the house, which is the only world she knows.”

- Sophie has taken on some of the phrasing and patterns of Brandford’s language. But, apart from the final sentence which she lifts almost entirely from Brandford, from the very beginning, she makes her own text, shaping the language to the cat Humble’s perspective and creating her own voice.
- Many more children can do this, given the chance.

Conclusion

- Learning to write is complex, but that doesn't mean it should be arduous. Much can be learnt implicitly as children engage with powerful texts.
- We need to give time and space and prominence to this activity.
- In so doing, we are enabling children to take possession of the written word, enjoy its power and make it work for them.
- And we can all have fun while we're doing it!

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