

Acquisition of Writing: Two Case Studies of Indian Children

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Leaving the safety of the skill-oriented lessons and trusting a child's natural ability to acquire language, particularly literacy—an activity so culturally foreign to many Native groups—can be scary for teachers of American Indian children. Can written language really be acquired in much the same manner as spoken language? A person who has ever struggled with either reading or writing, remembering the chore of trying to complete such assignments in school, might well answer unequivocally, "no." However, after my experiences with two first graders, I would have to say, "yes."

Children want to write. They want to write the first day they attend school. This is no accident. Before they went to school they marked up walls, pavements, newspapers with crayons, chalk, pens, or pencils...anything that makes a mark. The child's marks say, "I am."

- Donald Graves

Background

Donald Graves (1983) shares with his readers what he has learned about children's writing. Graves's work, which began in 1972 with his doctoral dissertation on the composing processes of seven-year-olds and culminated in the NIE study on the composing processes of children age six through ten, points out that what makes writing work for children is allowing them to control it themselves. A child's control of writing is illustrated with the example of Brian, a nine-year-old. "Brian grows in self-directed searching for the best way to write his selection about gray squirrels" (Ibid: 8). Graves gives the example of a second grader, Jill, in a writing conference with her teacher. Jill has been experiencing a writing slump. At first the teacher plays the role of a directive, pushing teacher. However, by the end of the conference, at the point that Jill decided what information to add to the book, the teacher began to relinquish her position of control so "she could return control and responsibility for the writing to the child" (Ibid: 9). Again and again, Graves points out that the teaching craft, as well as the writing craft, needs a careful, unhurried approach to succeed.

Graves makes a strong argument for allowing children to choose their own topics from the beginning. Research indicates that writers "who learn to choose topics well make the most significant growth in both information and skills at the point of best topic" (Ibid: 21). Helping children choose their own topics is not, of course, done in a vacuum but becomes part of the total fabric of the classroom. Furthermore, Graves urges teachers to help students publish their writings in book form for the rest of the class. "Writing is a public act, meant to be shared with many audiences" (Ibid: 54). Publishing contributes to a writer's development by developing a sense of past and future. It likewise contributes to a growing awareness of audience. "Thus, publishing solidifies the reasons for writing in the first place" (Ibid: 55). Furthermore, in the chapter entitled "Surround the Children with Literature," Graves suggests using professional writing as a model and likewise to treat children's writing as literature. Such sharing of works at the same time with the same treatment not only helps a child realize what is contained in literature and the process of composing itself but the literature also provides facts, drama, problem solving, and precise language."

The home environment of children, however, will affect how a child acquires literacy. Heath (1983) looked at the use of and expectations for literacy in two communities: Roadville and Trackton. The specific question Heath was trying to answer was, What were the effects of preschool home and community environments on the learning of those language structures and uses needed in classrooms and job settings? In Trackton, a Black community whose members worked in the mills, the primary sources of reading material were newspapers, car brochures, advertisements, church materials, homework, and official information from school. Additionally, there were other kinds of permanent reading materials in the community, such things as boxes and cans of food products, house numbers, car names and license numbers, calendars, telephone dials, written messages on televi-

sion, and name brands which were part of refrigerators, stoves, bicycles, and tools. Trackton parents did not buy books for their children, create reading and writing tasks for them, or consciously model or demonstrate reading and writing behaviors for them. Children did, however, frequently ask what something "says," and adults told them.

For members of the Trackton community, reading was a public group affair. Reading alone was frowned upon, and individuals who did read were criticized for being antisocial. "Jointly or in group affairs, the children of Trackton read to learn before they go to school to learn to read" (Ibid: 61). Reading for them was almost always within a context of immediate action: someone needed to read a letter's address to prove to the mailman that he should be given the envelope, or one must read the price of a bag of coal at Mr. Dogan's store to make the decision to purchase or not. Occasions for writing were generally those in which Trackton residents said they could not trust their memories, or they had to write to substitute for an oral message.

Roadville residents, on the other hand, attempted to give their children the "trappings of literacy." In Roadville, a White, working-class community with four generations in the textile mills, reading was an activity everyone heartily endorsed. There, individuals subscribed to such magazines as *Better Homes and Gardens*, *McCall's*, *Popular Mechanics*, *People*, and *Time*. In addition to these, they also had the local paper delivered every evening and bought the *National Enquirer*, *Family Circle*, and other reading materials at the grocery or drug store. Additional reading materials included church bulletins, football game programs, the Bible, warranties, circulars, and directions for putting together Christmas toys. While everyone talked about reading, few people did it.

Unlike Trackton mothers, Roadville mothers bought books and read them to their children at bedtime. Before their babies were six months old, they read simple books, usually featuring a single object on each page. As they got older, they chose books which told simplified Bible stories, introduced the alphabet, numbers, or nursery rhymes, or contained real life stories about boys and girls. Later, when the children began to watch "Sesame Street" and "The Electric Company," their mothers bought books, games, and toys derived from these shows. In addition to the reading done at home, some efforts with reading were extended outside the home. At the dentist's or doctor's office, pre-schoolers were entertained with magazines and books. Use of writing in Roadville was primarily restricted to letter writing by women, but also included occasional short notes.

While the children of both communities came to school with experiences with literacy, literacy for Trackton children was context-bound. Their home experiences with literacy did not translate readily into success at school. The home experiences of the Roadville children, however, did.

Clay (1981) explored children's beginnings with script. Working with children between the ages of four to seven, she collected samples of their work to illustrate how individual children begin to decode written language. One of the most fascinating aspects of her study is the incredible variety among the perspectives on writing that children have. One child may just be beginning to discern the shapes of individual letters while others, having mastered that, are struggling with what a line of print is (i.e., moving left to right and then moving down and starting left to right again). Still others, having mastered both of the above, may be struggling with correctness of expression in their writing. Some children may be focusing on the structure and patterns of written language, experimenting with that, while others are busy using writing as a form of communication.

Clay sees the teacher's task as one of increasing the child's awareness of written language. This awareness includes learning the following: (1) to understand that print talks, (2) to form letters, (3) to build up memories of common words constructed out of letters, (4) to use these words to write messages, (5) to increase the number and range of sentences used, (6) to become flexible in the use of sentences, and (7) to discipline the expression of ideas within the spelling and punctuation of English. This hierarchy of awareness allows the teacher to plan activities for each individual child as he or she begins to unravel the mysteries of writing. Clay discusses the following stages and principles in children's writing: (1) Sign Concept—a sign carries a message, (2) Memory Concept—the message the child speaks can be written down, (3) Copying Principle—to establish the mechanics of writing, (4) Flexibility principle—urging children to explore the limits of acceptable variation in letter formation, (5) Invention Principle—arranged lists of what a child has learned or is learning, (6) Recurring Principle—the tendency to repeat an action, and (7) Generating Principle—recombining and rearranging known elements to get new ones.

Research

It was reading Clay's book, *What Did I Write?*, which prompted me to explore what my own first graders could do. At the time, I was tutoring two first graders who were just learning to write: a girl, Navajo-Apache, and a boy, Lakota-Laguna/Acoma. The girl had had little contact with either Navajo or Apache culture. She was a monolingual English speaker. While quite good artistically, she had been having extreme difficulty decoding print. The mother, a single parent, had had post high school training at a technical vocational institute and

had worked in a managerial position. Although there were children's books in the home, there was no established routine for reading them. Outside of the children's books, there were no magazines, newspapers, or other children's books; there were no magazines, newspapers, or other books of any kind. There had been no modeling of either reading or writing by the mother.

The boy had been raised primarily in a Pueblo where he attended kindergarten and part of first grade. At the time of the study, he lived with his mother, step-father, and a half-brother (two years younger) in a one-room apartment. The mother held a managerial position while the father was a seasonal construction worker. There were no written materials of any kind in the home. The mother, while expressing a desire for her son to have a good education, basically felt that reading and writing are the exclusive domain of the school.

I began my study by buying each child a notebook in which he or she could write. Both of them had done writing for me before, but it had been on loose leaf sheets of paper which I had brought with me each time. We had done the usual tracing, copying, and using a finger for spacing. Somehow, having their own notebooks helped to spark their interest. The results were quite spectacular.

The girl, who fortunately had already been allowed to do a great deal of exploring of written language in her classroom, began immediately to compose using words from her reader. Her first sentence was, "Help! Help! I see a Bears." She asked me to write the next sentence down for her. "What do I do?" Then she copied it. Her final sentence was, WHO-O-O-O-O-O." This last statement was a bit of a triumph in itself. It was a word which she had heard in a story but never had seen. This was her usual strategy for completing her writings, looking up words in her reading book and asking for assistance with the words she had not already encountered in print. All her writings in her notebook were about "Bears," with each page exquisitely illustrated. During the following weeks, she produced these texts:

- (2) Bears
I am not scared
of Bears no more.
- (3) See Bears
Bears see me.
- (4) You see us
And the Picture
- (5) Bears is my
best friend
- (6) Bears like me
- (7) I see Bears
Bears Bears
Bears Bears Bears

After she finished a composition, she would read it to me. She also sometimes liked to read her writing book from beginning to end.

In addition to her own writing, we also did several story dictations. The first one I have included here was done months before I had read anything on the acquisition of written language:

This is a butterfly
to George Ann and this
George Ann is a nice friend
She is my best teacher.
I hope she puts this in a
frame.
Love,
Donna

The End

I think it particularly interesting that this dictation shows evidence of both letter and story form as well as a sense of audience. The next story is entitled "I Had a Fun Ride" and was a report on a trip she took with me to Chaco Canyon.

The only part I didn't like was
the bumpy part when the truck
jumped up. I liked walking up and
down in the mountains. I liked the
candy I bought.

When I went home in the truck, I
got an ant bite. I got two bites.
He must have thought I was candy.

When I got home, I ate a sandwich
and popcorn.

Both pieces show a developed sense of audience. For the first piece, I was the intended audience; for the second, the audience was her classmates. In both pieces she chose details which she thought the intended reader might want to hear.

On the other hand, the boy came from a more traditionally structured classroom in which he had not been allowed to do any exploring of written language. His beginnings were somewhat more humble. His first entry consisted of a very busy scene with a monster, shooting, and swastikas. After reminding him that this was a writing book, he drew a picture of an exploding dog and asked me to write the word, Boom. His next entry consisted of a rocket ship and a swastika and the word Joey written twice—once on the rocket ship and once at the top of the page. One thing of note is that he placed a colon after both Joey's. It was not until his fourth try that he came up with anything approximating text. He had drawn a police car with a bubble above it. In the bubble he wrote "you are arrested." (I spelled the words for him.) Likewise, the boy's dictation was remarkably different from the girl's:

This is a fairy tale.

A big dragon.

Oh, no here it comes.

Help! Shes going
to eat me up for
supper.

I hope he doesn't
eat me.

I wish, I wish
he wouldn't find me.

I am gonna escape.

I will not let him
get me. And if he
does get me, I will
hit him with my
stick which has nails
poking out of it.

Oh, boy! I'm glad
I killed him.

His story appears to show no sense of audience. In fact, it sounds very much like private speech (Vygotsky, 1962). However, it also sounds very much like some of the dialogue on Saturday morning cartoons. Something interesting happened with the writing of this story. Since the script took up two pages, I had numbered each. He noticed this immediately and decided to turn his notebook into a real book and began

TABLE 1: Summary of Two Children's Stages of Writing Acquisition

<u>Phase</u>	<u>Girl</u>	<u>Boy</u>
Pre-writing Phase	Looks around at external things; says, "lets see, what can I write about today?"	Draws pictures and talks to himself; talks to me.
Composing Phase	Makes use of resource materials such as books; asks to have words and phrases written down; rereads as she goes.	Asks how to spell things.
Post-writing Phase	Usually reads it back to me.	Continues to draw or announces that he's done.

numbering all the pages. His next few entries then consisted of attempts to write cursive.

Following his seventh birthday, the boy requested we do a dictation. He dictated a story about visiting his grandfather on his birthday:

I went shooting.
 There were these
 orange things. There
 were these things
 that made them
 go up into the sky.
 They were like
 flying saucers.
 My grandpa used
 the rifles. I used
 pistols. I shot one
 one of them and I shot
 a real bird.
 Then, we went
 to my Grandpa's
 home and had my
 Birthday Party.

This shows a greater sense of audience awareness. Before he started dictating, we had already discussed some of the things which had happened that day. This rehearsal may very well be the event which allowed him to dictate a more audience-aware story. Toward the end of the tutoring, we started the publication of a book. It was based upon our visit to a nearby duck pond. Before he dictated anything, we had a chance to discuss the previous day's events. He dictated a simplified version of the trip, hitting the highlights. On the following day, we started making the actual book itself. The first thing he did was to number the pages. We then turned our attention to the task of turning his story into a book. I read back to him what he had dictated. We discussed how to break it up. We then focused on what would go onto each page. He began work on the dictated sentence, "I slipped in that green stuff, and then I fell." The sentence he finally wrote himself was, "I fell. I got wet." He could have simply copied the dictated sentence, but he chose to edit his final text using words he could write himself.

Conclusions

I was immediately struck by the labeling aspects of the boy's writing. It seems suggestive of Heath's (1983) study. For instance, in the Trackton community, reading activities for children consisted of reading such things as addresses on envelopes or slogans on T-shirts. His drawing of a rocket labeled "Joey" is much like a

T-shirt design. However, unlike Trackton residents, Pueblos have no literate traditions at all. Whenever reading occurs, it comes as an activity imposed by an alien culture (John-Steiner & Osterreich, 1975). The girl, on the other hand, comes from a home where the mother, like the Roadville mothers, provided some of the trappings of literacy. She had worked with her daughter on recognizing the letters of the alphabet, for instance. However, most of the interaction with literacy still lay in the domain of school literacy. Greater differences certainly emerge when comparing their individual composing processes, as summarized in Table 1 above.

Because of the boy's overt use of language while writing and the lack of sense of audience in his early dictation, he falls into Graves's reactive category: Children who were identified as reactive showed erratic problem-solving strategies, the use of overt language to accompany pre-writing and composing phases, a lack of sense of audience when writing (Graves, 1975: 236). On the other hand, the girl's exhibition of little overt language to accompany writing, periodic rereadings, and a sense of audience, places her in the reflective category: Children who were identified as reflective showed little rehearsal before writing, periodic rereadings to adjust small units of writing at the word or phrase level, growing sense of audience connect with their writing. (Graves, 1975, p. 236)

In the acquisition of script, the boy's use of his notebook to practice cursive indicates a need to copy. Also, his labeling in the initial stages shows development of sign concept (Clay, 1981). It was not until we began work on a book that he moved into the message concept (Clay, 1981). With printing, he is still grappling with dimensionality and directional patterns (Clay, 1981). The girl, on the other and, shows much greater control of form. She has a developed sense of spacing. However, she still has not mastered directional principles and occasionally lapses into the flexibility principle (Clay, 1981).

Apparently, then, with fine tuned interaction, acquisition of literacy can be brought about in much the same manner as acquisition of oral language. The activities and principles herein discussed can be expanded and applied to entire classrooms with surprisingly good results. Moreover, such methods appear to be equally as effective with Native American children as they are with their non-Indian counterparts.

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