

I Can't Read Reading but I Can Read Writing!

This article looks at how two eleven year old boys came to write a book each. Both were attending a remedial class for two terms and neither had made significant progress. Through the production of a book, each came to conquer his fear of print and experience success at both reading and writing.

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I have been using the writing process since reading Donald Graves' *Writing: Teachers and Children At Work* some years back. It changed my approach to the teaching of writing by involving the children directly in their own learning.

The first major discovery I made is that writing is not language written down but rather a different form of language. Secondly, I discovered that writing is a process rather than an end product the finished piece goes through several stages of writing so that the author can clarify his intention for writing. These revisions are brought about in conference with the teacher and/or his writing partner or group.

At each of the conference stages, suggestions are made which the "author" can take on board or not! This idea is very important as it gives the child a very definite say in what he is producing this empowerment is central to the notion of authorship.

When I was appointed as remedial teacher in the North Dublin suburban school where I work, I decided to capitalize on the reading-writing connection when dealing with the children I would teach. The children ranged in age from eight to twelve and were withdrawn from their classes on a daily basis. They came in groups of four to six for 30 minute sessions. I provided them with a variety of real language, real writing and real reading situations. Creativity rather than a more structured system was stressed.

THE BOOK ARTS PROJECT

Last year while attending the VI UK Literacy Conference I went along to a session

given by Paul Johnson, Art lecturer at Manchester Polytechnic. The workshop was called "THE BOOK ARTS PROJECT" and has to have been one of the most inspiring talks I have ever attended. It combined the notion of the child as author and artist/illustrator in the production of a book.

Adapting his ideas to my particular situation presented me with some problems. Firstly Paul was a very talented artist who described himself as a "teacher-performer". He knew how to inspire and develop artistic talents in the children I didn't!

Secondly there was the basic assumption that each child would have access to a plentiful supply of paper and cardboard, varying types of crayon, pencil and paint, book binding equipment and an "expert" to guide the work! My children had me!

Undaunted however, I began with the two children I felt had accomplished least in the course of the first two terms.

David and Brian were in V Class. David was the most unenthusiastic child I had ever encountered. His fear of failure didn't allow him to even try! Brian was painfully shy and timid. Neither lad would take part in group activities though I had managed to establish fairly good individual relationships with each. These relationships had given a whole new meaning to the term "nodding acquaintance!"

The three of us set about looking at books and how they were made. I knew that in order for the idea to work, the children would need certain skills, but more important was the idea that it was something that would have a fairly tangible and immediate result!

I also began to experiment with book-production and showed them a couple of samples I had made. Both were impressed enough to want to get to work. David immediately said that he wanted one particular book whereas Brian was a little more cautious.

Though both immediately wanted to cover the pages of the blank books with print and colour, I introduced them to the notion of manuscript and "roughs" before the book could be produced.

FAILURE AND SUCCESS

For David the experience was a rather painful one. Though we had decided that story preparation had to precede the book production, David went right ahead and wrote directly into the book. He wrote and rewrote, tore and swore, and at the end of a week was reduced to "stupid bloody idea, anyway!" and gave up!

But in the process he had managed to come up with a few viable ideas for stories. He was quite willing to talk about them and even to allow me to experiment with them, but under no circumstances would David put one on paper.

By contrast Brian was busy. Overnight we had roughed-out the story of FRED, an ordinary house spider, friend of Jim and mortal enemy of Mother.

Fred lives quite happily under the washing machine. One day Mother squashes Fred under foot. Jim is plunged into despair. Following the matchbox funeral, he pines for the loss of Fred as he sits at the kitchen table. Great emphasis is placed on Mother's reaction to this.... "Mother was really sorry for what she did!" when suddenly from under the fridge walks a spider.

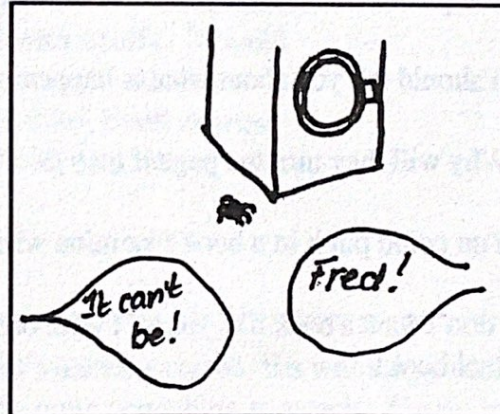
"Fred!" shouts Jim.

"It can't be Fred!" says Mother

"It is! Look! It is!" cried Jim.

"Look at the white spot on his back!"

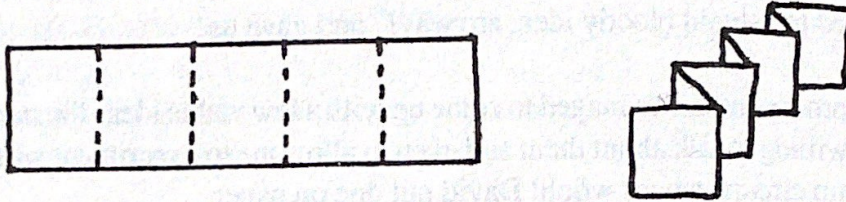
They all lived happily ever after!



Brian was delighted with his effort. This was the first real success that he had ever had at school and he was elated. He was actually enthused to the point where he asked for help with planning how the story was to be presented and luckily included David in the decision making.

The two lads plotted and planned for three days, discussing where the text should be in relation to the illustrations. These were initially referred to as "writing and

pictures” but the appropriate terminology was taken on board without any great problem. The final effort was a five page hinged fan book.



David was now hooked, and with Brian’s help, “MUFFY” was born. Again, the whole process was repeated and David decided that his book should, at all costs out-shine Brian’s in every way. He became obnoxious about it to the point where the two quietest kids in the school had a stand-up, sit-down row about how the book should be presented.

“The picture should tell you what will happen on the next page!”

”It should tell you about what is happening on this page”.

“Why will they turn the page if they don’t know what’s going to happen next?”

“You could put it in a book like mine where the pages open out flat!”

“I don’t want a book like yours. I want one where you have to turn the pages.... like a real book!”

Though I was amused at the pair wrangling about the book I was suddenly aware of all the knowledge they had accumulated about books and their production. They were quite technically advanced in how they wanted their work to be presented and though they hadn’t given thought to how the book would read yet, they had a real sense about what the book was to do for the reader.

The final result was almost a carbon copy of Brian’s book, format-wise, but rather uniquely wonderful in how it was presented.

DAVID'S FIRST SUCCESS

**There was once a kitten called Muffy.
Muffy loved to play with wool while the
old lady was knitting.**

**One day the lady was outside her house
and she left all her wool on the floor.
Along came Muffy and she saw the basket.**

**She ran over and hopped in the basket of
wool. Muffy had got all tangled up in it.
Then in came the old lady and she saw Muffy
in the basket. She said "Oh no what have you
done to my wool" she said to Muffy. "What will
I do with you at all?"**

**But she was not very mad with Muffy. The old
woman loved the kitten too much. As she
tidied the wool she said, "I think I will change
your name. You will be Fluffy the kitten."**

This marked quite an achievement in David's learning career. His whole approach to the visual presentation of the book was quite something to watch. Firstly he presented the book on white paper and when he saw that the illustration was not really that eye-catching, he asked me to help back the book on red card. He made a cat from wool and glued it to the cover and the final touch? the book had to be laminated.

I was aware that in helping to produce Brian's book David had gained the courage to start his own book..... a sort of safe "dry-run" for him. David had conquered his fear of putting something down on paper at last!

BOOK DESIGN

When I tried the idea out with the other children I was quite amazed at how ingenious some of the book designs were. Maintaining the reader's interest became a motivating factor when editing and considerable time was spent on designing book covers to attract the attention of the potential reader.

The project focused their attention on the books they had become familiar with in the class library over the year. Suddenly well-loved stories were looked at a new as story and illustration were examined as to how they served each other. The children were learning what they wanted to know and so the process became a natural learning sequence.

SOME OBSERVATIONS

On the occasions when I got a chance to simply observe what was going on I saw that there was a lot happening in terms of what was being learnt. The whole idea of presenting a book made the public role of the writing somehow more real and the children were able to be far more scrupulous in their editing roles. This covered not only the grammar/spelling aspects but also the content especially in sequencing the episodes within the story and presenting them with the reader in mind.

When the children came to writing their books they behaved just as Donald Graves intimated they should. They became well motivated young authors, writing, editing and thinking about how best to present their work.

Though it was a project which kept me on my toes.... the enthusiasm to "get it right" meant that I was constantly working both as technical advisor and editor despite the fact that I still maintained the same working arrangement as I had when the children had been "writing stories".

But most importantly, the books were being read, not only by the children in my room but by all the children in the school. The authors had found an audience!

REFERENCES

- Graves, Donald (1987). *Writing: Children and Teachers at Work*
Portsmouth: Heineman Educational Books.