

How Young Writers Communicate

For them talking, singing, drawing, and acting are all part of the writing process.



Jeffrey, a preschooler, is drawing another dinosaur for his dinosaur book. As he draws, he pretends to be a dinosaur by making growling noises. Suddenly he jumps up and announces to the girl beside him, "I'm going to eat you, Kristen!"

Lindsay, another preschooler, is writing a letter. She begins to make d's on her paper. She explains, "They're for the song. You know, sometimes they're booked together." She hums as she writes. When she reads her letter she says, "I have fun writing with you

Thank you for letting me come downstairs. Love, Lindsay." She turns the page over to where she has written the notes and begins to sing, "La, la, la . . ."

Young children approach writing in a manner different from adults. Adult writers try to communicate primarily through words, resorting to graphs and pictures when words are not enough. Young writers use everything they know about communicating in oral language, art, music, and drama to make sense of the writing process and to communicate to an audience (Harste et al. 1984).

We have made great strides in understanding how young children approach the task of writing. Research has progressed through four stages of investigation. The first stage, *studies of invented spelling*, brought knowledge that the child is capable of making personal discoveries about the way speech sounds are used in written language. The second stage, *studies of individual children learning to write*, brought knowledge of the child's active role in constructing a system of written language. The third stage, *the social context of writing*, shifted the focus from the young child as a solitary writer to investigating early writing activities as performances that constitute one's culture. The latest stage, *viewing writing as a multimodal experience*, looks at the alternative expressions of language, such as speaking, listening, and reading, and the alternative communication systems, such as oral language, art, music, and drama, as they are included in the writing event.

Writing is now being viewed in its larger context of communication. Research suggests that young children convey meaning to others using many different communication systems and that they use what is known about one system to support the understanding of another system (Harste et al. 1984, Karnowski 1985). In other words, they use the more familiar communication systems to add depth and meaning to their newly acquired skill of writing.

In order to observe young children composing, I set up a writing center in a preschool classroom. The children, ranging in age from three to five, usually wrote as a very social group of three students at a time. The writing center was a free choice area and only one of many activities from which they could choose. The center contained lined notebook paper, unlined colored paper, small colored notepads,

envelopes, small teacher-made blank books, pencils, markers, and crayons. The average time spent at the center was 35 to 40 minutes. As the young writers composed, they also used oral language, drawing, music, and drama to increase their communication potential.

Oral Language

Children use oral language for many different functions (Halliday 1973, Tough 1976). When writing they use it to seek needed information, to assist in the encoding and decoding process, to share information, and to elaborate on the meaning of their product to others.

Speech becomes a prewriting strategy when the topic or content of the writing is explored and decided upon.

Avigael: "I'm going to write something about the last holiday I enjoyed so much."

At other times, speech becomes a memory device to help hold the thought and transfer it to paper.

Lincoln: "I know how to write my name." He then orally spells it as he writes.

Lindsay is helping Avigael write the word *didn't*. "D, E . . . Oh, there's another D in it. Here, write another D right there. Now A . . . I mean E."

Speech can also be a postwriting strategy to help elaborate and communicate meaning when written words are not enough.

Lincoln writes R O under his picture of a robot. He then goes on to explain about the robot. "There's two things. There's a robot and a row of flowers. I'll put a stomach on it. Buttons to control them. Robots have to be controlled."

Marte draws a picture of a man. She labels her drawing *Dad*. To elaborate on this she says, "That's who I went out to lunch with."



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Drawing

Drawing is one of the primary ways young children communicate. Many research studies have concluded that very young children, even as young as three, understand the difference between drawing and writing (Lavine 1972, Hiebert 1978, Harste et al. 1984). Young writers use drawing to explain and embellish their writing, usually as a prewriting strategy.

Avigael is beginning her book, which she has titled *My Family*. She plans her first page: "I want to make a little picture. It's gonna be of my whole family, and there's five people. I'm gonna start with my Cabbage Patch." After drawing the picture, she labels each person in her family.

Jeffrey is drawing another dinosaur for his dinosaur book. "It has three toes ... he's eating a pencil." He makes growling noises as he draws in the teeth. "My dinosaur eats everything. How do you spell everything, dinosaur?"

Music

Young children enjoy using the sounds of music to make meaning. They often hum or sing while they are drawing or writing. A few may want to make notes for a singing portion of their written composition.

Avigael sings part of her note: "Avigael would like to tell you her first, last, and middle name. They are Avigael Ann New-

house. After you've slept the whole night through, sometimes you sometimes like to wake up and sing, la, la, la ... la."

Drama

Young children can use both body language and oral language in a dramatic situation to communicate meaning. Drama can assist oral language, complement drawings, and add spice to writing.

Todd is adding a picture of a clown to his circus book. "I'm going to make a clown." He acts out what a silly clown would do.

Marte is telling the other children about the word she has written, *sassy* (sassy). Marte says, "We say that word at home. Whenever we're bad we say ... my daddy says (she lowers the tone of her voice and crosses her arms), 'You're a sassy mouth.'" She then decides to add the word mouth to the word *sassy*. She writes *sasemath*.

Guidelines

Writing is but one system of communication. It is one way to exchange meaning with another. Just as children seem to be actively constructing their knowledge about written language, they also seem to be going through this same active construction with the various alternative communication systems of speaking, drawing, music, and drama. The early childhood writing program depends on a writing environment that encourages children to use all of their communication potential to make sense of the writing process. This goal can be accomplished by following some guidelines.

1. *Teachers of young children need to know what children understand about communication in general and writing in particular.* They must build on the knowledge young children have acquired prior to coming to school. To do this effectively, educators need to be cognizant of the growing body of information on communication and early writing and then use this information when observing young children in a writing situation. Because children will come to school with varying experiences with print, early childhood teachers must also provide an environment that will allow students to experiment with writing and to share with others their growing communication awareness.

2. *Teachers must redefine their idea of what writing is.* If teachers value only conventional writing, coinciding

with adult notions of how writing should be represented, then the exciting literacy growth of young children will be missed. Early experimentation with scribble writing and invented spelling must be valued and encouraged in the same way as experimentation in speaking and drawing is appreciated. Convention should never come before language expression.

3. *Because young children often combine writing with other alternative communication systems, teachers should include writing tools in other areas of the classroom, as well as in the writing center.* Writing tools in the music area encourage the writing of musical notes or words to go with a rhythm. Writing tools in the home-making area encourage the writing of shopping lists, phone messages, notes, and reminders. Writing tools in the art center encourage children to write about their pictures, and writing tools in the block area encourage the labeling of structures and buildings. Writing flourishes in a social environment where young children are free to use oral language, art, music, and drama to explore and enhance their writing.

By encouraging young children to use their full communication potential, early childhood educators help children connect the function of writing to that of other means of communication. □

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