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CONTEXTS AND STRATEGIES FOR WRITING WITH URBAN ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER STUDENTS

- talk
- reading
- audience

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There is no more promising way of increasing the closeness of subcultural groups to their own roots and culture "than by cherishing and nourishing the speech of the home and the neighbourhood and by helping it to find the kind of expression in story, poem, play, which can communicate the spirit of the subculture to a multicultural audience."

Britton, 1982, p.203

In this paper I plan to consider how current ideas in the teaching of writing can be applied and extended to develop writing competence in Aboriginal and Islander students in urban schools. In particular I will focus on the place of talk in the writing program, reading as a model for writing, and the development of a sense of audience.

The role played by the home in the development of literacy skills has been extensively explored and, for whatever reasons, it appears that children coming from backgrounds where literacy is valued and practised are more likely to develop literacy within (or despite?) the school situation. Wells (1981) found, in his Bristol study, that

the best single predictor of attainment of literacy after two years of schooling was the extent of the children's own understanding of the purpose and mechanics of literacy at the time when they started school. (p.263)

Likewise Stubbs (1980) claims that young children from cultural backgrounds with no tradition of literacy have particular difficulty in learning to read (p.99).

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Without any empirical data, but with considerable opportunity for personal observation, it would appear to me that many Aboriginal and Islander students in Townsville come to school from homes where there are few, if any, books; where the old respected family members make little use of literacy to achieve their purposes; where such activities as writing up minutes of meetings or composing church newsletters are seen as onerous tasks; where reading and writing for personal satisfaction are rare activities; and where bedtime stories from books rarely exist.

One could certainly not claim, however, that these children come from backgrounds that are in any way deprived. Indeed, the children are surrounded by an environment rich with human activity and, in particular, rich with talk; where 'yarning' is an important part of social activity and where even the smallest experience can be picked up verbally and turned, with humour, into a yarn that will be repeated and savoured over many occasions. In such environments human relationships are of prime importance.

Therefore the challenge for teachers seems to be how to utilize the rich linguistic background of the children as a basis for the development of their writing competencies.

Before considering how to develop writing competencies, we should consider why such development might be necessary or desirable. For many Anglo-European teachers, the value of literacy, and of literature, is accepted often without question. But this valuing is not necessarily shared by other groups and some minorities see literacy as a threat to their traditional values and way of life (Gere, 1981, p.120). One specific research study carried out in New South Wales and Victoria showed clearly -

that the written word, though holding much interest for Anglo Australians, contains little relevance to Aborigines and their life-styles. Thus little motivation exists for such skills which are not prized as they are in the non-Aboriginal society.

(Fesl, 1984, p.14)

In particular, while there was a rejection of English literacy *per se*, Aboriginal people were interested in it for specific purposes only, for example, reading a motor mechanics manual or recipe book (p.15)

Indeed, literacy can become just another means of domesticating people if the only words they read are those of the dominant culture, and the only stories that they write are shaped in the

image of that dominant culture. For Aboriginal and Islander students the development of writing competency must be seen in terms of its potential to empower students. This empowerment can take on two focuses. First, it can be seen in terms of the access that literacy can, but does not necessarily give to the wider society. It can also empower by providing a means by which students transform their world or shape their experience of the world in a way which enables them to gain a broader understanding of their own lives and develop ways of using their education to exert some control over their environment (Fiore and Elsasser, 1981, p.365). The use of writing to separate ideas from the self in a way that makes them easier to explore and develop (Smith, 1982, p.15) also promotes the type of abstract, disembedded thought valued in Western society and so necessary for success in current education (Donaldson, 1978, p.78-95).

Aboriginal and Islander people, through the National Aboriginal Education Committee, clearly indicate that the education that their children receive should develop

the academic and technological skills required
by Aboriginal Australians

and as well, *strengthen Aboriginal knowledge of, and pride in their cultural heritage* (NAEC, 1982, p.63). Thus, the development of writing competency in Aboriginal children must be in the light of these twin goals.

Many Aboriginal and Islander children, however, operate in classrooms where their own dialect is not a legitimate form of communication, where their own style of story telling is rarely heard, and where the experiences of Aboriginal and Islander people are not expressed in the literature available for reading, and where the task in hand is given more value than the human relationships involved. This is certainly not the fault of the individual teacher but it does point to the difficulties that Aboriginal and Islander children face if they are to use their own talk, and their own ways of relating as a basis for writing, or their own experiences as subjects for writing.

TALK

...writing without an understanding of its roots in
speech is nothing.

(Graves, 1983, p.162)

...reading and writing both have their basis in talk
and ways of using language for writing and in reading
must be established through talk.

(Tough, 1977, p.7)

Talk is, "the sea on which everything floats".

(Britton in Kantor and Rubin, 1981, p.56)

If talk is a significant component of the development of writing competencies, then we must consider 'whose talk?' For many Aboriginal children, the home-rooted language is Aboriginal English, a specific dialect of English with its own linguistic rules, lexicon and sound system that all differ in varying degrees from the Standard Australian English of the classroom. For Islander children, the home-rooted language may be Torres Strait Creole, which may share some lexical items in common with English, but is in actuality a distinctive, separate language system (Shnukal, 1982).

Many teachers recognise that the starting point of English teaching is the experience of the children and the recognition of the validity of the home-rooted language (Protherough, 1983, p.21). However, according to Rosen (Anderson and Butler, 1982, p.25) the acceptance of children's dialect is a very subtle process. This is particularly problematic when combined with the goal of developing children's competencies in Standard Australian English, where the teacher has to function as a model for such language. The very nature of dialect and register means that people change and modify their speech according to whom they are talking. Thus when Aboriginal and Islander children talk to white teachers, they automatically move their speech closer to Standard Australian English. In this way they often show greater linguistic competence than their teachers who may be restricted to fewer codes than the children. This situation is exacerbated by a history in which Aboriginal and Islander ways of talking have been prohibited in classrooms.

Unless teachers make a specific effort to indicate that the children's dialect is an acceptable mode of communication, the whole school situation will quickly tell the children that there is only one acceptable way of talking in school. To legitimise the children's dialect may involve a devolution of power fostering more spontaneous use of language, allowing children to move across a spectrum of language codes, including switching dialects (Anderson and Butler, 1982, p.24). Thus, teachers need to encourage children to talk to others who share the same dialect, so that children can use their oral language skills as the starting point to writing. This may involve small group discussion with peers or the utilization of Aboriginal and Islander adults in classroom dialogues.

Whilst talk, however, may be a starting point for writing, we must recognise that talking and writing are different. Kroll (1981) proposes that the development of writing follows four

distinct but overlapping phases in relation to talk. Initially talk and writing are quite separate while technical skills in writing are minimal. During this stage, the writing down of the child's talk demonstrates the connection between oral and written language (p.41). As children develop the technical skills of writing, their composing is largely 'speech written down' with some compromises. Of course, if the child's speech is not acceptable classroom language this stage will be unnecessarily difficult. In this stage, Kroll recommends that teachers need to promote the development of oral language, particularly in different situations and for different purposes. For Aboriginal and Islander students this can include situations and purposes that promote the extension of both home-rooted language and Standard Australian English.

Kroll also recommends the provision of activities where speech and writing are similar (p.44). This includes speech-like writing such as journals and diaries. However, for children from backgrounds where writing is not common, these may not be fully understood, particularly if the teacher has not established a personal relationship, based on face-to-face experience with the student. Instead, writing-like speech may be more appropriate - for example, story-telling and monologues. Here students can be encouraged to tell stories in their home language, using their home style, as monologues. In monologues, speech is "less moored to circumstance and audience" and "floats more freely in time and space", moving "closer to organisation and composition, because some single mind is developing a subject." (Moffett, 1968, p.84). Moffett sees the "first step towards writing is made when a speaker takes over a conversation and sustains some subject along." (p.87). For younger students this may involve a brief statement within a dialogue. For the older student a suitable curriculum sequence might move from dialogue to verbal monologue to written monologue (p.87). Thus students can be encouraged at whatever stage of development to tell yarns, the sustained monologues of their home language, as a bridge from drama to other forms of discourse (p.84).

Again, however, teachers need to make special efforts to encourage students to bring their own story-telling style into the classroom by ensuring that students hear other Aboriginal and Islander people telling stories in their classrooms. They also need to know that teachers will accept the content of their stories. Such stories are often characterised by making fun of oneself and the group - "Murri couldn't keep that mouth shut"; "typical Murri"; "real Myall"; or "and-you-wonder-why-you're-black". Students need to know that teachers will accept stories which often reveal the poverty and oppression that Aboriginal and Islanders experience in our society. Here the concept of 'shame' is significant in that

many students do feel that white teachers, and their white peers, will judge their stories negatively. Stories might include getting floggings off your father, not having any food at home, your brother going to jail, being unfamiliar with Anglo-Australian customs. These are the stories that people tell in their home, that take the place of "once upon a time, there lived..."

Through encouraging students to share their anecdotes, teachers can, through their demonstration of interest in the children, help overcome student resistance to writing (Protherough, 1983, p.12). Teachers can also share their own stories and recollections with the children. Not only will this encourage the children's stories, but it will also contribute to the development of personal relationships between students and teachers, so important for Black students (Hughes, 1984, p.48).

The sharing of such stories can also be a learning experience for the teacher. As the students will be more competent in their own dialect and their own culture, so they will be the experts, teaching the teacher and so establishing the dialogue considered by Freire (1972) as an essential component of any literacy program that seeks to liberate.

To encourage children to talk and write in their own language, when they are surrounded by the writing of other dialects, children could tape their own yarns and transcribe them - or have them transcribed. Depending on their stage of development in writing they can then make revisions that will leave the writing as "nearly speech written down" or they may reconstruct their oral language to make the text more explicit, that is, more differentiated (Kroll, 1981, p.48). Working together on group stories, children would need to discuss the use of conventions to transfer their own idioms, pronunciation and intonations into writing, thus increasing their understanding and control of such conventions.

According to Britton (1982, pp.124-129) children's conversational, expressive speech is closest to expressive writing. For Aboriginal and Islander children, this conversational speech may be dialectical. Therefore, their expressive writing should also display dialect features. Because of the importance of expressive writing to the development of both poetic and transactional forms of writing, and because of the significance of expressive writing as a means of learning, then teachers need to ensure students do write expressively, in their own language, rather than produce a standard expressive writing. By encouraging children to tap into their own inner speech and by responding to the meanings within that writing, the teacher can help develop their expressive writing

so that it will be available as a tool for learning, or as a starting point for other writings.

Whilst children need to understand the differences between speech and writing, we must also remember that what often characterises mature writing is the sense of voice and conversationality (Kantor and Rubin, 1981, p.57). According to Graves, children

want their voices to be heard on the page. From birth they have been used to the sound of their own voices, expressing what they mean orally through stories, anecdotes, repartee, transactions, directions or arguments. When they write, it is only natural they want their voices to echo from the page.

(Graves, 1983, p.171)

For Aboriginal and Islander children this means Aboriginal and Islander voices.

READING

Reading provides the essential fundamental source of knowledge about writing, from the conventions of transcription to the subtle differences of register and discourse structures in the various genres.

(Smith, 1983, p.177)

Through reading, writing and discussing whole authentic discourse...students can learn better everything we consider of value in language and literature.

(Moffett, 1968, p.7)

Writers depend on writing.

(Protherough, 1983, p.52)

Just as listening to others speak is a fundamental part of learning to talk, so reading the writings of others is a fundamental part of learning to write. Reading provides children with an understanding of how written language functions. It provides children with models of writing from which they can generate their own rules about written language on the syntactic, semantic and discourse level. But reading can also teach us other things. In particular, if we consider the reading available in schools, reading



One to one teaching - grandfather helps grandson

*Interpretation by Billy Reid of a photograph provided by M.Heaven,
Principal, La Grange School, via Broome, W.A.*

can teach Aboriginal and Islander children that they are not part of any literate tradition. Whilst most teachers are aware of the need to eliminate reading material that perpetuates racism, in many classrooms children see no reflection of themselves in literature. Any Aboriginal literature present in classrooms tends to portray traditional lifestyles (for example, Dick Roughsey books) and for urban Aboriginal and Islander children this can be equally as foreign as any European book (Watson, 1982). When Aboriginal and Islander people are portrayed in literature, it is through the perceptions of white authors, e.g., Fingerbone in *Storm Boy* is an unusually alone Aborigine. Some of our most revered writers portray Aboriginal and Islander people in negative ways, Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves* being a classic example.

If writing is to be empowering, is to allow students to create their own reality through their own literature, then they do need models of their own people doing this. While limited, there is a growing amount of Aboriginal literature that could be used in schools. "People like Jack Davis, Maureen Watson, Kath Walker and Bobby Meritt, to name a few, are writing books, plays and poetry." (Hughes, 1984, p.48). A quick perusal of such writing may not, however, be pleasant for Anglo-Australian teachers. Frequently the literature speaks of hatred and anger towards whites, and tells of the depressing oppression of Black life since European occupation. Many whites find such expression offensive. If, however, this is how Aboriginal and Islander people see the world, then it is important that we accept and promote such expression in our classrooms, and accept our students giving similar expressions. As Westall (1979, p.13) asks, "How much of his true being does your pupil feel he can afford to give you?" Often we encourage children to give us "the pasteurised version: what they think is suitable for us to know. Polite small talk." (Westall, 1979, p.11). This not only affects our students' perceptions of themselves, but it can condemn them to spending the rest of their lives writing "polite cliches". Thus, the inclusion of Aboriginal literature, with all its obscenities, provides students with a model from which they can see writing being used to explore their world, to explain and to persuade.

Aboriginal and Islander children seem to be excited by the inclusion of their own literature in the classroom.

If you take black dialect poetry in with black kids, its electrifying. It's like something illicit has been brought in, pornography or something which they like, but don't expect at school.

(Anderson and Butler, 1982, p.25)

However, some children's excitement may be inhibited if they fear that other people in the class may not respond positively.

If there is a limited amount of Aboriginal literature, then we must promote the literature of the children in the classroom. Graves (1983, p.65) speaks of the danger of separating children's writing from 'literature' and stresses that we need to treat them both similarly so that the children's concept of 'authorship' develops. This is particularly important in groups where the number of authors in print is limited and where, in fact, the writing in our classrooms can be the beginning of a new tradition. The development of a new literature can be conceived as a significant component of the decolonisation process as experienced by non Anglo-European people as they redefine their world (Fanon, 1967, pp 190-193). According to Protherough (1983), models of writing "are seen as a means of signalling the teacher's expectations" (p.107). Often teachers are afraid that models will stifle the children's originality but "we can be so devoted to the concept of originality that we see imitation as a vice rather than as a sign of potential growth". (Protherough, 1983, p.157) and, of course, there is no suggestion that Aboriginal and Islander students should not read the works of other authors.

Aboriginal and Islander authors provide not only models of writing, but also models of authors. Smith (1982, p.201) indicates that children need to see writing being done.

The most direct and relevant way for a teacher to demonstrate to a child the power of writing is to write with the child.

However, for Aboriginal and Islander children, seeing other Aboriginal and Islander authors would have more impact. Where the presence of such people is not possible, as much information about the lives of Black authors would help students see them as real people like themselves.

AUDIENCE

Ideally, a student would write because he was intent on saying something for real reasons of his own and because he wanted to get a certain effect on a definite audience.

(Moffett, 1968, p.193)

A significant facet in the growth of writing competencies is the development of a sense of audience. Kantor and Rubin (1981) discuss the growth of audience awareness in terms of developmental

psychology, as a manifestation of decentring (p.57), as writers must infer information about their audience and their experiences, interests and language. Thus writers move from an egocentric perspective through to writing for the 'generalised other' (p.58). If children are to develop a sense of audience, they would be best encouraged to consider known audiences first. Thus Aboriginal and Islander children need to write for their families and peers before writing for mainstream audiences. Then they can work within their own world knowledge and with an understanding of the world knowledge of their audience to determine what constitutes autonomous, explicit discourse within their own sub-culture. This could be different from what is explicit and autonomous for an Anglo-Australian teacher. Before expecting Aboriginal and Islander students to write for a 'generalised other' audience, we need to recognise how culturally specific such a generalised other can be.

Aboriginal and Islander children tend to be field-sensitive or person-orientated rather than information orientated (Harris, 1982, p.144). Thus, the need for a real audience, and a known audience is of even more significance than it is for Anglo-Australian children. According to Edelsky and Smith (1984, pp.24-32), a real audience is an essential component of 'authentic' writing. In such writing, the audience determines the degree of explicitness in the text. Because authentic writing has clear purpose and audience, the writing has greater variety and depth than inauthentic writing, where the main aim is to comply with the teacher's expectations. Many Aboriginal children are likely to have developed an external locus of control (McGarvie, 1984, p.4) and therefore will accept poor grades without any real curiosity as to why they did not fulfil the teacher's expectations. Authentic writing for real purposes can help take the writing 'out of the classroom'.

A sense of audience will also vary with task difficulty. It is hard to be aware of audience, whilst struggling with content (Kantor and Rubin, 1981, p.59). As Aboriginal and Islander students are encouraged to write for wider unknown Anglo-Australian audiences they may best start with their own experiences, with the things they know best, particularly as the telling of Aboriginal and Islander experiences to the wider community is seen as valuable by Aboriginal and Islander communities.

Virtually all Aboriginal and Islander children will have younger sisters, brothers, cousins. Fostering writing for these children provides not only a suitable audience and purpose for older writers, but will also help develop literacy set in the younger children.

CONCLUSION

While I have focused specifically on only three aspects related to the development of writing competencies in Aboriginal and Islander children, teachers do need to consider all aspects of the teaching of literacy and their consequences for Aboriginal and Islander students. I am confident, however, that the more we foster the growth and development of Aboriginal and Islander writing as an accurate expression of people's experience, and the more that expression is available to others, then the more readily the next class of Aboriginal and Islander students will become part of a contemporary and literate Aboriginal and Islander society.

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