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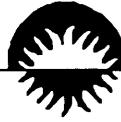


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Using Writing as a Clinical Intervention

**Michael P. French
Kim E. Reinhart**

The programs at the Bowling Green State University Reading Center are designed to help both elementary and secondary children improve their literacy skills by offering a variety of assessment and developmentally appropriate reading programs. These programs include individualized instructional programs which utilize a variety of language-based teaching strategies and techniques, including the use of writing as a clinical intervention.

According to Heller (1990), reading and writing are interconnected pathways to literacy. For many children enrolled in special reading classes (e.g., Chapter 1 or a learning disability resource room) this literacy pathway has become obstructed. For these children, reading has become a succession of stops and starts, changes in direction, and failed trips. Accordingly, the goal of instruction at the Reading Center is to help children find their way through these road blocks and detours. In a very short time, we have found that the writing process has provided just the "vehicle" for this journey to literacy.

The use of writing with children at-risk is not a new concept (Heller, 1989; Roser, Hoffman and Farest, 1990;

Tierney, Readence and Dishner, 1990). In programs such as Reading Recovery, writing is used to establish an understanding of the literacy process. According to Tierney and his colleagues, in learning to read by writing, children are able to see the interconnections between the two processes (p. 371). Likewise, at the Bowling Green State University Reading Center, writing is used to teach basic reading skills, to promote strategic reading, to develop metacognitive awareness and schema, and to develop a sense of ownership and pride in the children (See Figure 1).

How does writing promote skilled reading? One set of skilled reading characteristics is provided by Anderson, Hiebert, Scott and Wilkinson in *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (1985). According to this report, skilled reading is an interactive process which is constructive, fluent, strategic and motivated, and a lifelong pursuit. In developing each aspect, writing can provide access to reading proficiency.

Skilled reading is constructive

In writing stories, poems, and expository texts, the child constructs meaning. One type of activity we use to promote constructive comprehension is providing text for wordless picture books. In order to complete this reading/writing activity, the child must demonstrate comprehension of the story as shown through illustrations.

Skilled reading is fluent

Authors read what they write. They read to themselves as one method for revising; they read to others in order to gain assistance in editing their work; and they read to various audiences. In developing written work at the Center, children have many opportunities to read their work throughout the writing process. In each oral reading activity, students receive support and feedback from their audience.

According to Rasinski (1989), providing support to students during oral reading can facilitate growth in fluency (p. 691). In addition to reading to their clinician or to another teacher, they read to their parents, the directors, and, of course, to other children enrolled in the program, process which usually takes place as part of a formal author's chair activity.

Figure 1 Sample Activities

Traditional language experience activities Working with their clinicians students participate in a variety of experiences which promote writing. Cooking activities include making sandwiches, salads, and s'mores. Other activities include nature walks, tours of local stores, and scavenger hunts in the Education Building.

Writing comics Developing their own comic strip is a motivating activity for the children. Working with their clinician or with other children, the students read published comics, develop master templates and compose story strips. Some children use the *Disney Comic Strip Maker* (Sunburst) to publish their work.

Writing stories and poems All children write at least one story or collection of poems. In developing these written products, a conventional five-step writing process is used. Students share their writing during the author chair activity with their classmates and parents.

Computer-assisted writing Students use a variety of computer programs to assist in their reading and writing development. Traditional word processing programs allow students to enter text, edit, and format pages. In addition, students use story-makers like *Once Upon a Time* (Compu-Teach) to write stories which integrate text, sound and graphics. *The Print Shop* (Broderbund) is used to publish poetry or shorter pieces of text. Hypertext programs such as *The Manhole* (Activision) are also used to motivate student writing.

Other writing experiences Recently the children in the Reading Center went "to the end of the sidewalk." After reading Shel Silverstein's *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, students went outside and created a sidewalk quilt outside the education building. Within each sidewalk square, the children wrote their own poems, stories, and reactions. Some children copied and illustrated their favorite poem from the book, while others drew and labeled pictures.

Skilled reading is strategic

During the writing process, as children revise and edit, they must use metacognitive strategies to discern the sense of their writing. Even during language experience dictations, children can be heard saying, "That doesn't make sense!" By developing outlines based on story grammar, students develop effective strategies which can be transferred to other story-reading tasks (Pressley and Harris, 1990). Also, as children compile a personal portfolio of written texts, they use their own work as a personal dictionary – often referring to past stories to find the correct spelling of a word.

Skilled reading is motivated

According to Alderman (1990), successful teachers of at-risk students must combine a high degree of personal efficacy with high and realistic expectations for student achievement. As defined by Alderman, efficacy refers to "teachers' confidence in their ability to influence student learning and motivation" (p. 28). According to Ashton and Webb (1986), teachers with a high degree of personal efficacy are more likely to view low-achieving students as teachable. An obvious key to this expectation is the structuring of activities which will lead to student success. And tied to this success should be the message that the student made the success happen.

Language experience activities provide a natural pathway to self-esteem and success. Heller (1989) has found that even older at-risk students can benefit from the process of dictating and reading stories. At the Center, the LEA process is taken one step further – to publishing. Publishing can take place in several ways. For beginning students, or those with serious dysfunction, a sentence strip fluently read can be the published work. For others, a comic

strip, a poem, or the beginnings of a book show that students have mastered print. For others, the final product in this process will be an actual book (big or small) with title page, dedications, and illustrations. Regardless of the extent of the published writing, the ultimate goal of the process is the development of a published text which can be fluently read and easily comprehended by the student.

Skilled reading is a lifetime pursuit

Those who work with at-risk students know that intervention takes time. As Alderman states, "there are no miracles" (1990, p. 30). The process of learning to read and write takes time for able children, and children at risk are likely to experience success at a slower pace. Aside from these realities, the written products created by children at the Center are real indicators of growth. They demonstrate to the children, their parents, and the teachers that learning is taking place — that the pursuit is worthwhile.

In each of the defining characteristics enumerated above, writing is used to promote awareness of skilled reading behaviors. What impact does this have on the students' disabilities? Our preliminary data show a positive effect on the children's reading and writing abilities as well as on their attitude about reading. We are continuing to collect samples of children's work in clinic portfolios. In these portfolios, clinicians reflect upon and formally evaluate student progress. Also, we conduct conventional pre-post evaluations as appropriate. In both these formal and informal measures, we observe growth. We see growth in spirit, we see reports from teachers that tell us the children are performing closer to grade and age expectation, and we are receiving reports from parents and teachers who feel that the children are improving in both self-esteem and in literacy skills.

By using writing as a primary intervention vehicle, teachers can provide for skill development, strategic thinking, and self-esteem building. In resource rooms, using writing can provide for the basis of portfolio building and interventions. The activities can be easily adapted to classroom settings as well. As Heller (1990) has written, "The acquisition of reading and writing enables us to develop into the unique individuals we are all capable of becoming."

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Software

- Disney Comic Strip Maker* (Sunburst Communications, Inc., Pleasantville NY)
- The Manhole* (Activision, Menlo Park CA)
- Once Upon A Time* (Compu-Teach, New Haven CT)
- The Print Shop* (Broderbund, San Rafael CA)

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