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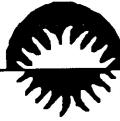


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The Composing Process: A Springboard for Literacy Development

**David L. Brown
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The composing process involves the methods used by writers to discover ideas, formulate goals, make plans, express ideas, and assess, revise, and edit their writing. Several years ago, few studies examining the children's composing process could be found in the literature. Yet recently, there has been an increased interest in all facets of composing. This interest has resulted from a concern for improving reading and writing skills, and has been the impetus for increased research activity. As a result of this research activity, models describing the composing process have been developed, and new issues are continuing to gain attention. One such issue relates to the techniques that children use when composing.

This article will review the research related to composing and will also describe the composing process used by young children as they develop into mature writers. Mastering this process is essential if children are to reach their optimum level of literacy development.

Research on composing

Lamme and Childers (1983) studied composing behavior by observing children, aged 2 to 4 years, who were composing in a group setting with a responsive adult. For sixteen forty-five minute sessions during a six-month period, the researcher acted as a support person for and an observer of the children. The study revealed that the children's composing process included a variety of scribbling, drawing, and writing behaviors. During the composing sessions, the children dictated, then wrote, then drew, and then shared their completed products with other students. Planning and revising occurred simultaneously as the children wrote their stories and drew supporting pictures.

A very extensive investigation (Graves, 1982) of the composing process was conducted at the New Hampshire Writing Process Laboratory. Employing an ethnographic approach, the researchers, during a two-year period, studied the composing process used by sixteen children. Eight of the children were from the first and second grades, and the other eight children were from the third and fourth grades. The sixteen pupils were selected to represent children of low, middle, and high writing abilities. The children's spontaneous comments were recorded, and their composing behaviors were videotaped and then examined. Afterwards, the children were questioned about their methods of composing.

As a result of the investigation, Graves identified three developmental stages in the children's composing process: 1) overt and early manifestation of speech, 2) page-explicit transitions, and 3) speech features implicit in text (Graves, 1982). Each of the developmental stages of composing was analyzed, and the pertinent characteristics of each stages were identified. During stage one, speech directs and

enhances the children's writing. Stage two is characterized by children drawing during the composing process. The third stage of children's writing growth resembles talk written down (Graves, 1982).

The participant-observer technique has been used in the kindergarten classroom for exploring the relationship between oral and written language. After using this technique, Dyson (1982) found that the children used talk to request information, to express their feelings, and to regulate social relationships. Furthermore, she noted that the children created messages, encoded messages, read messages, and drew letters during writing activities. Dyson's study also revealed that kindergarten children's writing moves from a "graphic" to an "orthographic" representation of speech. Only two of the kindergarten children actually tried to write messages. Initially, the children drew letters with no concern for meaning. Based on her observations, Dyson (1982) formed several conclusions:

Children's first representational writing serves to label (organize) their world. Talk surrounds this early writing, investing the labels with meaning. Eventually talk permeates the process providing both meaning (representational function) and means (directive function) for getting that meaning on paper (Dyson, 1982, p. 26).

Hall, Moretz, and Statom (1976) found that early-writing children came from home environments where writing was used in functional ways. Also, the parents read to their children and furnished reading and writing materials for their children's use. Genishi and Dyson also recognized the important role of parents in furthering literacy development: "parents are major contributors to the growth of communication in their children, particularly because of their role in

focusing and maintaining interaction" (Genishi and Dyson, 1984). In addition, "by observing their parents and others interacting with print, children learn that reading and writing have functional environmental uses" (Brown and Briggs, 1987). Consequently, the home environment may accelerate or delay children's composing development.

The composing process

Children often compose as a social activity, and this activity has an impact on the quality and quantity of their writing. Piazza and Tomlinson (1985) discovered that children who engage in social interaction during composing learn fundamental principles of how to write. Children understand that writing serves as a tool for communication and, also, that writing is a cognitive activity which involves thinking. Thus classroom teachers should encourage the natural conversations that occur when children are composing. This peer intervention, before the writing occurs, allows children to draw ideas from the feedback of their peers and to build a context or background for discovering meaning.

There are several classroom procedures that promote thinking and writing and, therefore, would enhance the composing process. Fitzgerald (1989) advocates group thinking conferences during which children read and criticize their own writing. Furthermore, Fitzgerald recommends some specific strategies for teachers to use: 1) The teacher asks students to write. The topic or type of writing may be assigned by the teacher, or the teacher may ask the students to choose their own topics. 2) Later (usually the next day), a small group of four to eight children assembles with the teacher, and students take turns reading their own pieces aloud. 3) After each student reads, the teacher asks three broad questions to motivate discussion: a) what was

the piece about? b) what did you like about the piece? and c) do you have any comments, questions, or suggestions for the author? 4) Later (usually the next day), students are given the opportunity to revise their own pieces (Fitzgerald, 1989).

The group thinking conference shows how social interaction can be used to promote critical thinking which, in turn, facilitates the revision process in children's writing. This is an excellent example of how literacy acquisition can be facilitated by social activities (Fitzgerald, 1989).

For younger children, the involvement of the teacher as a scribe could promote a united collaborative effort. Hayes (1990) recommends the use of language experience charts that are dictated by the children with appropriate collaboration among class members. The final composition could serve as the children's first published material if the product were put into book form.

Other researchers have studied the composing process. For example, Flower and Hayes (1980) collected think-aloud protocols from novice, as well as expert, writers to determine the cognitive processes involved in the problem solving of writing. From their findings, Flower and Hayes (1981) developed a cognitive-process theory of writing. Their model includes three major elements: "the task environment, the writer's long-term memory, and the writing processes" (Flower and Hayes, 1981). Planning, translating, and reviewing characterize the writing-process element of the model. Constant monitoring occurs as the writer continues to evaluate and revise the product. The Flower and Hayes (1981) cognitive-process model emphasized four major points: 1) "writing is... a set of distinctive thinking processes which writers orchestrate or organize

during the act of composing,” 2) “these processes have a hierarchical, highly embedded organization in which any given process can be embedded within any other,” 3) “the act of composing itself is a goal-directed thinking process, guided by the writer’s... goals,” 4) “writers create their own goals... by generating both high-level goals and supporting sub-goals which embody the writer’s developing sense of purpose, and... by changing major goals or even establishing entirely new ones based on what has been learned in the act of writing” (Flower and Hayes, 1981).

Other research has identified additional aspects of the act of composing. For example, some researchers have described the composing process as consisting of three stages: conception, incubation, and production (Britton, et al., 1975). Thus, researchers have different opinions about what stages should be included in the act of composing.

Some researchers have made composing models which have described writing as a recursive activity. One such researcher is Perl (1980) who believes that composing is a recursive process which varies cyclically from one writer to another. Perl arrived at this conclusion after numerous observations of the composing processes used by many types of writers, including undergraduate and graduate college students and teachers. The recurring or recursive behaviors were noted in the writers’ rereading after a sentence had been written. After continued reflection upon the topic, non-verbalized perceptions, and pauses, the writers reach to their inner feelings for content and structure. Perl (1980) stated that when children are composing, the observer “can see the shuttling back-and-forth movements of the composing process, the move from sense to words and from words to sense, from inner experience to outer judgment and from judgment back to experience” (Perl, 1980).

Therefore, as text is modified by restructuring, meanings are changed and refined. Innovative methods for observing and recording the steps used in the restructuring process have brought about a change in the way composing is viewed.

Recent research on the composing process and the writing development of young children has provided teachers with guidelines for needed changes in classroom practice. Harste and Burke (1985) have suggested a strategy called the authoring cycle. This strategy promotes activities which integrate reading and writing. Children are encouraged to use writing in functional ways. For example, children write in journals or learning logs; they write letters to pen pals; and thus writing becomes an integral, natural part of thematic teaching in content areas.

The decade of the eighties has been recognized as a period during which extensive research has been concerned with the composing process and the cognitive development of young children. Of course, the research is continuing into the nineties. This inherently beneficial research has caused a literacy revolution in the early childhood instructional programs. These subtle yet profound changes have resulted in educationally-prudent instruction that is more developmentally appropriate for young children.

Summary and conclusions

In conclusion, the composing process integrates the cognitive and psychomotor domains of learning. The child conceives ideas and utilizes the skill of writing to put the ideas on paper. This coupling of thinking and writing produces written communication that can be shared. It seems intuitively logical that these educational activities – reading

and writing – should be integrated in educational practice. This integration should be inherently beneficial to the child, as well as the teacher whose goal is to plan lessons that enhance learning.

The composing process seems to be very individualized because it depends on one's goals. Therefore, teachers should plan writing activities which emphasize broad themes and which contain valued and interesting content. In other words, the learning experiences should stimulate each student's desire to write.

The research examining the children's composing strategies indicates that the process is a highly socialized task for young children. Obviously, the children like to share their compositions with classmates, and this sharing motivates the children to become better readers, as well as writers. But in many classroom settings, children are required to perform composing tasks in solitude which would deprive them of the interaction that could contribute to their success.

Furthermore, during children's composing processes there seems to be a relationship between writing and types of drawing. Graves (1975) noted that children's narratives were more dynamic when the children's drawings took profile form. On the other hand, static facefront pictures resulted in stories which lacked action and a plot. There is no question that art adds an additional creative dimension to the composing process. Art can greatly influence composing activity, and teachers should use art for this purpose.

Unfortunately, many teachers teach art, reading, and writing separately. Yet, as children write, reading takes place. Furthermore, sometimes when writing, children

enjoy using art to add a pictorial dimension to their stories. These three activities of the curriculum — reading, writing and drawing — should be integrated in practice so that children can be provided with a more meaningful learning experience. The result will be a composing process that can serve as a springboard for literacy development.

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