A Journal of Reading, Writing and Critical Reflection

THINKING Classroom

Departments

Features

Printed by **Spaudos kontūrai** UAB,
Treniotos g. 8–7, 08121 Vilnius, Lithuania

Letter from the Editor

Guest editorial:
A new stage for *Thinking Classroom* and *Peremena*

It is our pleasure to announce that beginning in 2006, ownership of *Thinking Classroom* and *Peremena* will be transferred from the International Reading Association (IRA) to the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking (RWCT) Consortium, headquartered in Vilnius, Lithuania. This transfer is a homecoming of sorts. The journal was begun in Lithuania in 1999 under the auspices of the Open Society Institute (OSI) as a way to foster the vigorous and fascinating conversations that began when teachers from Ohio worked with teachers from the Czech Republic, and university researchers from the University of Tbilisi (in the Republic of Georgia) collaborated with researchers from the University of Georgia (in the U.S. state of Georgia). Teachers who had taught writing to students from Kosovo wanted to share their methods with teachers who had taught in urban neighborhoods in Detroit, Edinburgh, and London. The goal was to work in many languages using twin publications, the Russian-language *Peremena* and the English-language *Thinking Classroom*, as the thread from which local professional development materials could be created, adapted, and comfortably worn.

In 2001 the Board of Directors of IRA voted to incorporate *Thinking Classroom/Peremena* into the Association's journal publishing program. This move brought stability to the editorial work and production of the journals and allowed the Editors to concentrate on developing a vision that would drive the expansion of the audience and author base. Today thousands of teaching professionals read the journals, and submissions have been received from over 30 different countries. The journal has successfully provided an international forum for teachers, teacher educators, researchers, and others. *TC/P* now offers global perspectives and research-based educational methods across a range of learner-centered teaching strategies. Articles selected for publication maintain a balance between the theoretical and the practical, addressing issues related to critical and creative thinking, active and cooperative learning, problem solving, and alternative assessments.

The next stage in the life of the journal (or journals) is in fact a continuation of its original reason for being—to promote inquiry-based and student-centered teaching and learning worldwide. OSI/RWCT's leadership will sustain the development of *TC/P* as a premier international publication that talks explicitly about the relations between teaching and citizenship in emerging democracies—or in old democracies where ways of living together in open societies are taken for granted but shouldn't be. Using RWCT's vast network, we hope to extend even further the journal's scope and reach. The publication will also maintain close ties with Critical Thinking International, Inc., a not-for-profit corporation representing trainers and curriculum writers from the RWCT project, now making new friends for both the RWCT project and the journal in Africa and in Central and South America.

As Executive Director of IRA and Director of OSI's education initiatives we wish to thank all who have contributed to the success of these journals. Scholarly publications of this quality are a result of collaborative efforts between authors, reviewers, editors, publishers, and, finally, readers. We look forward to your participation in the continuing success of these journals as subscribers and authors.

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International Reading Association

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Ann S. Beck

Critical literacy in the classroom

Twelve adult students in an upgrading English composition class are beginning a lesson around Wendell Berry's essay "Why I Am Not Going to Buy a Computer" (Berry, 1990). A few students offer examples from their own lives that illustrate their support for Berry's argument that purchasing a computer is comparable to environmentally destructive practices like strip coal mining. One class member announces that though he disagrees with Berry's opinion, he nonetheless defends his right to express it. The teacher points out that after this essay was reprinted in *Harper's Magazine*, the editors published letters from disgruntled readers who took offense to the article. To help them determine the source of the controversy, the teacher and the students develop a list of questions: What kind of language does the author use? What is the text saying about people who buy computers? How else could the text have been written? What has been left out of the text? What view of the world is the text presenting?

In response to these questions, the students begin by describing their feelings toward the text. One student admits that she feels that Berry sounds "a bit old-fashioned," and she points to some of the language in the essay as evidence. Other students join in, suggesting that Berry sounds like "a snob," and one class member adds that she dislikes snobs because they "act like they're better than everyone." The teacher acknowledges the students' feelings, but also encourages them to move beyond the personal and toward more subtle interpretations of the text. As the class begins to examine some of Berry's sentences and phrasings, another student comments that while all people are entitled to express their opinions, the *manner* in which an argument is expressed has much to do with its reception. The spirited debate that follows touches on the author's intentions, the multiple meanings contained in the text, and social issues, including the right to free speech. When the class is dismissed, one student heads to the library to research strip coal mining for a possible future protest.

Critical literacy in the classroom

Understanding critical literacy requires examining the theoretical assumptions behind it and other closely related concepts, identifying the reasons why critical literacy is important, and addressing the challenges to adopting and implementing a critical literacy teaching approach. Because of the scope and complexity of critical literacy, however, it is helpful to begin with an example of a lesson that shows how it looks in the classroom. One of the key features of the lesson just described that identifies it as based on a critical literacy approach is the use of *dialogue* as a tool with which students construct meaning from texts: "critical teachers promote classrooms that value student voices, experiences and histories as part of the course content" (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002, p. 379). Though the lesson initially appears teacher centered, questions quickly shift the proceedings to a discussion dominated by students' responses. These responses are important because "students involved in a critical literacy curriculum read the world and the word, by using dialogue to engage texts and discourses inside and outside the classroom" (p. 377). The critical teacher thus does not *tell* students what to learn,

but rather encourages students' voices to enter into conversation together so as to mutually inform their understanding of the text and its associated issues. This understanding of the critical teacher's role is based on the assumption that learning is a social act in which language acts as mediator. Because learning takes place in society and cannot be separated from its context, learning opportunities are optimized when conditions favor a multitude of social interactions with knowledgeable others and peers (Rogers, 2002). The critical teacher's primary responsibility, then, is to establish the classroom as a place where all students feel safe enough to engage with one another in critical dialogue that will move them to higher levels of understanding.

In addition to encouraging dialogue, a critical literacy teaching approach also highlights *reflection* as a method by which students will make meaning of the text under study. In the classroom lesson described earlier in this article, the critical teacher encourages reflection through open-ended questions that ask students to consider the points of intersection between their lives and the text. Her questions challenge students to reflect on their emotional responses to the text and to contemplate how their backgrounds and prior experiences shape their interpretations. These kinds of questions are based on the conviction that students are not passive receptacles awaiting the arrival of knowledge from an expert source, but rather people who actively construct meaning from their own experiences: "The teacher introduces the subject matter as a problem for students to reflect on in their own language. Students, who come to class with their own universe of words, themes, and experiences, are challenged to go beyond themselves, into a new territory generated from their backgrounds" (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002, p. 380). This new territory, however, includes terrain inhabited by the myriad of viewpoints around them. Beyond simply asking students to reflect on their individual experiences, open-ended questions challenge students to consider how multiple interpretations of the text are possible; these questions "ask us to imagine standing in the shoes of others—to understand experience and texts from our own perspectives and the viewpoints of others and to consider these various perspectives concurrently" (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002, p. 383). It is important to note that these questions assume that multiple interpretations of any text exist, and that no one interpretation represents all viewpoints. Accordingly, the teacher's role is therefore not to guide students toward a traditional interpretation of the text, nor to influence students to adopt her personal viewpoint: "Teachers are no longer dispensers of knowledge, promoting only one canon or belief, but agents of change, assisting students in seeing themselves within the larger historical, political, cultural, and economic structures where student voices exist" (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002, p. 379). Thus, the critical teacher primarily encourages students to reflect on the relationship between their experiences and their interpretations of texts, and to become aware of the differing perspectives around them

A focus on sociopolitical issues and social justice through *textual critique* is a third feature of the lesson that is characteristic of a critical literacy teaching approach. In this lesson, the teacher encourages students to closely examine the specific words used by the author and also asks the students to think about how language can serve different interests. Included among these questions are inquiries into the voices not represented by the text. These inquiries reflect a belief that language and texts are never neutral, but "shot through with power—social, cultural, and ideological—that constructs and is constructed by daily interactions" (Rogers, 2002, p. 774). Because language always represents interests at both the personal and societal levels, "texts are social constructs that reflect some of the beliefs held by some people at the time of their creation" (Tasmanian Office for Curriculum, 2003); thus, an important first step to recognizing and acting on social inequities involves "questioning the historical, political, and social intent of the text" (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002, p. 378). This dimension of critical literacy questions the implicit legitimacy of unequal power relationships contained in texts and, in so doing, moves students beyond the personal "to interrogate how sociopolitical systems and power relationships shape perceptions, responses, and actions" (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 383).

This shift from the personal to the social arena appears in the critical literacy classroom as a highlighting by the teacher of difficult, controversial issues: "A critical literacy approach places in the foreground issues of power and explicitly attends to differences across race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and so on" (Cervetti, Pardales, & Damico, 2001, p. 9). As the students in the critical literacy example take the knowledge gained from the lesson beyond the classroom, they demonstrate how a critical literacy teaching approach is always accompanied by the responsibilities of being aware of social inequities.

What *is* critical literacy?

Although a critical teaching approach is characterized by dialogue, reflection, and textual critique, theorists and educators have defined the concept of critical literacy in many different ways. These definitions range from understanding critical literacy as a higher order cognitive skill (Halpern, 1998), an attitude toward textual critique (Tasmanian Office for Curriculum, 2003), a social and political practice (Siegel & Fernandez, 2000), to a way of knowing the world (Freire, 1970). Some of this variation arises from critical literacy's resemblance to a closely related concept: critical thinking. Luke (2000) described critical thinking within a language arts curriculum as referring to aspects of higher order comprehension skills, such as inferring endings, considering bias, and authorial intent. Higher order skills can be distinguished from lower order thinking because "higher order skills are relatively complex; require judgment, analysis, and synthesis; and are not applied in a rote or mechanical manner" (Halpern, 1998, p. 451); most important, because the exercise of these higher order skills is based on deductive logical analysis and standards of rationality, critical thinking is based on a view of knowledge as arising from rational thought (Menssen, 1993). This tradition, named by Cervetti et al. (2001) as liberal-humanist, shares much with a positivist or empirical-analytic paradigm in its assumptions that reality exists in the material world and that this world is knowable through correct sense impressions and objective analysis. Consequently, a liberal-humanist orientation assumes that a text represents an author's intentions, and that a good interpretation can be distinguished from a better interpretation through logical reasoning and objective analysis (Paul, 1993). Most important, literacy, within this paradigm, refers to a set of "individual skills within human subjects" (Luke, 2000, p. 451). The goals of critical thinking, then, can be summarized as teaching students the skills required to "learn about the world, understand an author's intention, and decipher whether information gained is valid or worthy of skepticism" (Cervetti et al., 2001, p. 4).

Critical literacy, on the other hand, derives largely from the influence of Paulo Freire, and is associated with an entirely different definition of literacy and philosophical tradition from that of critical thinking. Freire, an adult literacy teacher who developed and implemented a program of literacy for low socioeconomic communities across Brazil, saw literacy as an "act of knowing" (Freire, 1970), insisting that "the cognitive dimension of the literacy process must include the relationships of men with their world" (p. 212). According to Freire, adults become literate to learn about and act on the world; thus, literacy is always embedded in a social framework. Accordingly, literacy is not an isolated or "purely technical action" (p. 216), but a social practice, accompanied by reflection, intent, and action:

> Learning to read and write ought to be an opportunity for men to know what speaking the word really means: a human act implying reflection and action. As such it is a primordial human right and not the privilege of a few. Speaking the word is not a true act if it is not at the same time associated with the right of self-expression and world-expression, of creating and recreating, of deciding and choosing and ultimately participating in society's historical process. (p. 212)

By defining literacy as social practices within communities, Freire took critical literacy a step beyond critical thinking and emphasized the importance of analyzing the relations and fields of social, cultural, and economic power where people actually use texts (Freire, 1970). Thus, while both critical thinking and critical literacy refer to higher order comprehension activities, a critical literacy education also engages students in the transformation of established social, cultural, and economic relationships.

A second point of distinction between critical thinking and critical literacy concerns their differing philosophical orientations toward the interpretation of texts. While critical thinking sets the goal of textual critique as a rational interpretation backed by logical evidence, critical literacy holds that texts as social practices can be interpreted according to a wide variety of perspectives, and that any given interpretation only represents one relative reality: texts "do not possess any meaning in and of themselves, and meanings emerge only in relation to other meanings within specific sociopolitical contexts" (Cervetti et al., 2001, p. 7). This orientation toward texts is closely aligned to a poststructuralist tradition in which knowledge and reality are not stable or objective entities, but sites of continual exchange and flux: "the world's knowledge is not fixed waiting to be discovered; it is continually expanding, generated by our reflective actions" (Doll, 1993, p. 102). Critical literacy, then, implies that there are no right or wrong interpretations and openly encourages different, competing views. The emphasis on extending the critique of texts to the society in which these texts are conceived or studied explains why critical literacy is generally understood as an attitude or philosophical orientation toward textual analysis that encourages the critique of dominant practices (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002; Luke, 2000; Tasmanian Office for Curriculum, 2003).

In the classroom setting, critical thinking and critical literacy approaches overlap in many respects, but differ primarily in that a critical literacy lesson clearly engages in social critique and identifies social transformation as a goal. While both concepts position students as active meaning makers and emphasize textual critique and analysis, critical literacy also explicitly engages in social critique because it is through this critique that students can challenge and act on social inequities. Similarly, both a critical thinking and a critical literacy lesson will rely on open-ended questions as part of the textual critique, but a critical literacy lesson draws attention to differences across race, class, and gender, and, further, examines these differences "not as isolated occurrences but rather as part of systematic inequities or injustices" (Cervetti et al., 2001, p. 9). Critical literacy in the classroom, then, consists of activities that help students "reflect critically on the nature of literacy and literacies as social practices" (p. 7), and, in so doing, encourages them to understand how they can resist or reconstruct textual representations. A critical literacy lesson, therefore, builds on critical thinking but necessarily always includes a social critique and a commitment to social action.

Why teach critical literacy?

Teaching students critical literacy is important for a number of reasons, the first of which is the potential of critical literacy to address the challenges of rapidly advancing technology and a society swamped by masses of information from sources across the globe. Because of its emphasis on textual critique, critical literacy helps us to "make meaning from the array of multimedia, complex visual imagery, music and sound, even virtual worlds that confront us each day" (Tasmanian Office for Curriculum, 2003, p. 1). Further, critical literacy will assist us in dealing not only with the explosion of information from continually arising technologies, but also with the specific effects of that explosion on the workplace. Halpern (1998) argued that employers now expect an employee to have advanced cognitive skills, "someone who can carry out multistep operations, manipulate abstract and complex symbols and ideas, efficiently acquire new information, and remain flexible enough to recognize the need for continuing change and new paradigms for lifelong learning" (p. 450). She also warned that if people are not taught how to deal with the deluge of data that must be "selected, interpreted, digested, evaluated, learned and applied…they are in danger of having all of the answers but not knowing what the answers mean" (p. 450); thus, an education that encourages students to develop critical higher order thinking skills and apply these skills by questioning the "the historical, political, and social intent of a text" (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002, p. 378) will serve individuals well in the 21st century.

In addition to preparing citizens to deal effectively with the products of new technologies, critical literacy may also help society meet the demands of rising immigration rates and multicultural

Photo: RWCT Czech Republic

populations. The patterns of underperformance of minority students—defined here as students who are "ethnically, linguistically or socioculturally distinct from the white majority" (Jacob & Jacob, 1993, p. 4), relative to their white peers on all measures of academic achievement—make it crucial that educators and policymakers begin to consider the question of how to address this growing diversity so as to encourage educational equity and learning opportunities for all students. Valuing "student voice, linguistic diversity, cultural pluralism and democratic schooling while emphasizing literacy and biliteracy as processes of empowerment" (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002, p. 378), critical literacy promises to expose the political and economic structures that support unfair practices and work toward improving society: "critical literacy empowers us and our students to actively participate in a democracy and moves literacy beyond text to social action" (p. 378).

Challenges of a critical literacy approach

Despite the promise of a more democratic society through critical literacy, however, critical teachers must take care to address a number of potential issues that can arise in the classroom. The implementation of a critical literacy teaching approach presents some difficulties, particularly for inexperienced and beginning teachers. Although critical literacy in the classroom has been well described by various researchers (Bean & Moni, 2003; Rogers, 2003; Vasquez, 2000), the very student-centered nature of classroom discussion demands a highly variable and context-specific set of both methods and materials which cannot be readily transferred to other classrooms. While Luke (2000) numbers himself among those individuals who have attempted to "actively combat the distillation of critical literacy into a single-step method or a commodity for publishers" (p. 454), for beginning teachers the absence of a single, widely accepted model for implementing critical literacy translates into a classroom in which there are no restrictive rules, but correspondingly also very few supports. In a study of the classroom practices of 13 teachers interested in a critical literacy approach, Lewison et al. (2002) observed that beginning teachers, identified as newcomers and novices by the researchers, encouraged dialogue and reflection in their classrooms, but failed to explicitly take up sociopolitical issues or to promote social action (p. 391). The researchers explained this lack

as due to teachers' "hesitations and uncertainties of what critical literacy looks like in classrooms and what is appropriate for…classrooms in terms of materials, texts, and discussions" (p. 391). They suggested that support mechanisms, such as workshops and study groups, are required for critical teachers to implement all dimensions of critical literacy and advise that in the absence of this support, critical literacy may not be fully implemented in most classrooms.

Another challenge with adopting a critical literacy approach—one that is particularly relevant for beginning teachers—concerns classroom management. With the focus on dialogue, reflection, critique, and social action, the critical literacy classroom is necessarily student centered and debate rich, but the teacher has the responsibility for generating the conditions in which this debate will proceed in a mutually respectful way; thus, the teacher must "use authority and expertise to promote rather than silence student agency" (Shor, 1997, p. 9). Because "saying too much or too little, too soon or too late, can damage the group process" (p. 9), the teacher must constantly negotiate a complicated process in which authority is transferred back and forth between students and the teacher. But if "distributing democratic authority is a teacher's challenge in a dialogic program" (p. 9), then a lack of authority can also "interfere with a teacher's ability to initiate a critical and power-sharing process" (p. 9). In the absence of teacher authority, students may display disruptive and disrespectful behavior as they attempt to exercise their voices without a full understanding of the responsibilities accompanying their newly empowered positions within the classroom. Further, students' disruptive behavior can overwhelm other students' voices, and shift the teacher-student relationship to a power struggle for control of the classroom. Thus beginning teachers, struggling with the very real concerns of classroom management, may find the establishment and distribution of authority to be an overwhelming task in an already stressful situation.

The challenges to authority, however, are not limited to beginning teachers of critical literacy. Critical literacy, which asks that students question the assumptions underlying texts, also asks students to examine currently existing social conditions so as to uncover inequalities. As institutions that both participate in and contribute to society, schools—and their literacy curricula decisions—are necessarily political in nature, and reflect general beliefs about literacy that may be incompatible with critical values: "literacy curricula decisions are often the result of conscious choices tied to the political and economic structures of a country" (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002, p. 378). By perpetuating unequal social practices, schools are at once uncomfortably positioned as both the targets of interrogation and the agents of change. Similarly, as representatives of the school, critical teachers send out a double message: the critical teacher must encourage students to resist her authority and the institution that supports her, while simultaneously discouraging the disruption of school rules and boundaries. Given that critical literacy discourages blind trust in authority figures and, further, promotes extending this distrust beyond the classroom, the question arises as to how teachers and students can form effective, nurturing relationships in this climate of suspicion. A related question is whether it is realistic to ask school boards to support questioning that is designed to challenge and perhaps bring about the very collapse of their support structures.

Conclusion

"Critical education cannot feed the hungry or raise the minimum wage; it can only invite people into action to achieve these and other humane goals" (Shor, 1997, p. 3). Despite this limitation, critical literacy offers considerable promise in helping us to bring about change in ourselves both as individuals and as a society according to a new vision that acknowledges the multiplicity of voices around us that have the right to be represented and heard. By encouraging students to truly engage in the processes of dialogue, reflection, and textual critique, critical teachers show that understanding literacy as social practices that derive their meaning from the relationship between the

individual and society announces education as a process by which children move toward responsible citizenry in a democratic society. Although the challenges of teaching critical literacy make it unlikely that critical literacy will be taken up in the majority of classrooms, bringing elements of a critical literacy approach—particularly dialogue, reflection, and textual critique—to the classroom has much potential to help students become active participants in their own meaning-making experiences and change the way we think about education.

For literacy teachers of adult students, one of the major challenges consists in convincing students that their lack of formal education has not rendered them unintelligent, uninformed, or helpless. By bringing forward subject matter identified by the students themselves as relevant to their lives, a critical teacher encourages the class to talk and reflect about their experiences as a way of showing them that their voices can be used to change both themselves and the world around them. Although students who challenge authority, disrupt discussions, and fail to demonstrate an understanding of the responsibilities that accompany the use of their newly discovered voices are regular participants in a critical classroom, motivating people to actively engage in conversations that may move humankind forward in development remains, nevertheless, a worthy goal for all teachers.

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Adopting developmental literacy continua

I teach English as a second language (ESL) to elementary students at International School Bangkok (ISB), Thailand, where English is the medium of instruction. ISB has close to 2,000 students representing more than 40 nationalities. Over 60% of the students are nonnative English speakers. Native and nonnative speakers are immersed in English across the curriculum. About one third of nonnative English speakers receive additional support through our ESL program in order to achieve the English-language proficiency necessary to participate independently in all academic areas. Developing solid language skills of all our students involves a partnership between ESL and mainstream teachers. They co-teach, plan together, and engage in professional learning in order to promote literacy and language development for all students. One of the major initiatives of ISB in the area of literacy is the adoption of reading and writing developmental continua.

The following article is the result of my reflection on the process of adoption, purpose, and value of literacy continua for diverse educational settings.

Search

In the search for better assessments and instructional practices, our school, like many other educational institutions, has been surfing the waves of literacy innovations, refined visions, and philosophies for quite a while.

Anyone browsing through information on this subject would be struck by the sheer volume of creative solutions and materials available in English. There is so much on literacy education in publications, the Internet, teacher training programs, and so on that it is an overwhelming task to absorb and interpret the information and make appropriate choices and decisions. There is a wealth of information available in other languages as well. Unfortunately, it often remains unknown unless it is translated into English. Reading educational literature in other languages highlights differences, of course, in philosophy and approaches to teaching literacy, but also highlights many similarities. After all, in different parts of the world education in general and literacy in particular have many common goals. The cognitive-developmental philosophy embracing the "developmental view" of children's learning has been shared by a number of psychologists and educators around the world and provides solid theoretical support for many educational initiatives developed in the United States and other English-speaking countries. These ideas are behind many innovative strategies and creative instructional practices that highlight the value of gradual construction of meaning through social interaction and the role of educators scaffolding the learner through the stages of development. Neuroscientific research is often used to describe and explain the process of cognitive development and maturation that are essential in understanding the relationship between brain structure, emerging functions, and learning. It seems that there has been a natural evolution of ideas supporting the developmental approach that appeals so much to educators of young children.

As I mentioned previously, our school is a linguistically and culturally diverse educational setting, and there is a growing need for authentic and comprehensive literacy assessment tools, especially at the elementary level when children

are learning to read, write, listen, and speak purposefully. Our 6- and 7-year-old, mostly multilingual, beginning readers and writers differ widely in their level of skills, range of experiences, and rate of development, as well as in their linguistic proficiency and cultural background.

The parents, of course, are as diverse as the students in their attitudes, assumptions, and expectations. Most of them, however, are usually interested in straightforward and comprehensible information about their children's progress. They want to have a clear idea of what the numbers and letters on the report card mean, how their child's performance compares with the performance of other students in class and other children of the same age,what their children's strengths and weaknesses are, and what they can do to help. In other words, parents want to know what it takes to develop literacy skills and what the whole journey through this process might look like in the context of a given educational setting. I was looking for the same information when I had my first encounter with an international school as a parent some 14 years ago.

Developmental literacy continua

A tool that can address some of these issues is a literacy continuum, which is based on the developmental approach and is gaining wide support among elementary school teachers. A few developmental literacy continua have been in use for the past 10 years or so in schools where English is the medium of instruction. The most well known are the First Steps literacy continua developed by the Education Department of Western Australia (Education Department of Western Australia, 1994), and the Reading and Writing Continuums (as well as an oral language continuum for students who are learning English as a second language) (Campbell Hill, 2001). These have been used across the United States and in a growing number of international schools.

All literacy continua, including the ones mentioned above, share a similar format. They resemble a timeline, or a learning progression, broken into stages or phases that can easily fit on one piece of paper. Each stage or phase consists of key indicators or descriptors that define skills, knowledge, and behaviors that constitute the process of acquiring competence in reading, writing, or oral language. These descriptors are typically worded in a positive way, stating what a child is able to do, and appear to have been selected on the basis of empirical data accumulated by researchers and educators observing children developing language and literacy skills in formal and informal settings. By analyzing evidence from samples of children's work and from a variety of assessments—including observations and anecdotal notes—and matching them with the descriptors, a teacher can place a student at an appropriate stage on each continuum. This placement should help the teacher to determine areas of strengths and weaknesses of the student and define further instructional steps. For example, placing a student at a "developing" stage, where he or she writes one or two sentences about a topic, would require a teacher to plan for deliberate guiding strategies in order to take the student to the next, "beginning" stage, writing several sentences, and then eventually to the "expanding" stage, writing short fiction and nonfiction (Campbell Hill, 2001). The strategies might include modeling, providing appropriate samples, demonstrating steps in the writing process, providing support in small groups and one-on-one instruction, giving ongoing feedback, teaching students to assess their own writing, and so on. Placing students on the continuum several times a year would show the amount of growth and the rate of development over time.

When I looked at developmental continua as a teacher for the first time about 10 years ago, the idea of using them immediately appealed to me. It is easy to see why. The language of the descriptors is positive and comprehensible, and the format of the continua is friendly—usually one or two pages with headings indicating the symbolic name of the stage, the approximate age of children, and the list of key descriptors defining the stage. This brief outline creates a clear mental picture. For those who appreciate a narrative format, there are accompanying materials, including narrative "portraits of readers" or writers (Campbell Hill, 2001). These are very useful in helping parents see their child's development in the context of the whole journey toward attaining proficiency in literacy. These tools, I thought, obviously had potential to be great organizers for the complex factual

evidence teachers collect. It became obvious to me how they could serve several very important purposes—mapping instances of student learning, tracking and reporting their progress over time, and guiding teaching and learning.

Imagine you are a teacher at the beginning of the school year. You have a blueprint of a possible or even desired or optimal progression in literacy development for all students on one piece of paper. You can use it to map each child's performance and rate of development. This information will suggest areas you and your student need to focus on in order to move to the next stage. You can also use it to "ballpark" a group of students or to determine the status of the whole class. It can help you plan for the overall instructional focus and supporting classroom structures and strategies.

Imagine you are a parent. The continua can answer some of the questions in which you are most interested. Instead of just receiving a letter or a number grade as an assessment of your child's work, the relevance of which is somewhat obscure, you will have an explanation—through the descriptors on the continuum—of what your child is able to do and a glimpse of where he or she is going. By looking at the outline of the stages and the descriptors, you will be able to identify your child's strengths and weaknesses as well as further expectations and steps to be taken.

Now imagine you are a student. With the help of the teacher you can have a clear, connected picture of your learning and become, to a certain degree, a decision maker in the process. That can be both stimulating and challenging.

However, some might say that very young children are not developmentally ready to analyze their learning and make appropriate decisions about it. I would counter that it is surprising how many young children do seem to possess the innate ability to analyze and assess their own behavior when performing creative tasks such as drawing or playing with blocks. I believe that it is possible to build on these strengths. Any learning begins with input and support of knowledgeable adults, and very young students can develop the skills to think about their learning and verbalize their thoughts with their teachers' consistent guidance.

Adoption

Our school attempted to introduce developmental continua a few years ago. There was a beginning stage for disseminating the information. The seeds were planted, but they went through a long period of gestation. Some teachers were already familiar with the tool and had been using it for their classroom purposes They reported that it helped them to observe their students and collect assessment data in a more meaningful way (they knew what they were looking for), as well as establish more efficient communication with parents. Other teachers filed away the information for possible future use or reference in view of other pressing needs and responsibilities. It often seems safe and reasonable to stick to established routines rather than try out something new. Some teachers seem to be more amenable to adopting innovations, and like to experiment with new tools and materials. Others need more support and professional training before they can embrace a new idea. When the whole faculty is involved in a learning process, it sounds reasonable to take into account a wide range of differences among the teachers in the way they learn and internalize instructional practices.

Around this same time the school was looking at ways to improve the system of reporting student progress, by creating a new report card and portfolio of supporting materials. The new report card was based on curricular outcomes and emphasized reaching the acceptable standard. However, it failed to address effectively the aspect of "growth and development" over time. The portfolio, part of our reporting system and designed to support the element of growth, lacked clear and meaningful interpretation and integration with other assessment pieces.

When the seeds finally started to germinate, we were not quite aware of how radical a change adopting continua would be, and what a school could anticipate while going through the process—especially when they looked so attractive and easy to use. Any new tool comes at a price; unfortunately, the price tag isn't always visible. There was a temptation to introduce the new tools throughout the elementary school without further delay. However, the roots had to become stronger and reach down into the rich soil of daily planning and teaching and receive nutri-

ents in the form of ongoing professional development. We realized that no matter how attractive a whole-school initiative might be, enthusiasm on the part of a small group had to be matched by enthusiasm on the part of many. Even though the need for better assessment practices had been in the air for a while, and general feedback on the continua was quite favorable, the school was not ready to introduce them formally.

Further work on curriculum documents identified the need for more common understandings, practices, and agreements. Most teachers I work with share in principle a common philosophical mindset, based on research and supported by personal experience, that young children develop skills gradually and in similar ways but at different rates, and that the stages of literacy development are generally predictable and can be described. It is, therefore, reasonable to address the needs of individual students and scaffold them through the process rather than deliver the information and evaluate the contents of the "receptacle." It is not very productive to wonder whether or not the necessary information or skill is present because it was not "given" by the teacher or not "received" by the student. Better results can be achieved through assessing the current achievements, supporting students at their level, and providing a bridge to the next stage. This common understanding, which is often taken for granted, is interpreted in different ways through a variety of curricular documents and realized differently through instructional practices. It was obvious that philosophies needed to be clearly articulated and fine-tuned.

It seems that teachers and administrators move through stages and phases of a learning continuum, just as students do. Some were already competent users and ready to move forward: "I've been using this continuum for the past two years and sharing it with parents. It already fits my way of teaching and reporting"; or, "I have been trained to use continua and incorporate them in my teaching practice." Others were just getting familiar with the tool and needed more time: "I have never used a continuum, and I am not sure I will be able to explain the descriptors to the parents and be confident in placing students on the continuum without having additional information and training."

After having taken a resolute stand to introduce and adopt the continua as soon as possible, we then took a step back in order to identify our needs. Aligning all educational components—including philosophies, curricular outcomes, and assessment pieces—with the continua and shaping instructional practices thus became the first priorities. This direction is invaluable in terms of professional development. The whole faculty has to revisit and reinterpret the existing materials in light of the new framework and develop common language and common goals, design supporting materials, and investigate best practices. In the process, teachers had to become intimately familiar with the continua and the descriptors. As often happens, the more familiar one becomes, the more issues begin to emerge.

The language on the continua seemed comprehensible, but each teacher interpreted it in a unique way, creating a unique mental image of what each descriptor should mean in practice based on the teacher's experience and background knowledge. We realized that there were discrepancies in our interpretations as soon as we tried to practice determining students' place on the continuum by analyzing students' writing samples. There were many heated debates. "My kindergartner cannot be at the same stage as your second grader. It doesn't make sense." There is a danger of visualizing a developmental level through the grade-level lenses or age expectations. It is difficult for a fourth-grade teacher, for example, to imagine what a first-grade piece of writing might look like. In this instance, the European model of one teacher leading students through the elementary/primary school seems to me a better way of providing consistency and continuity in the learning and emotional development of young children. To avoid this pitfall it was necessary to establish cross-grade-level communication—to collect massive amounts of evidence and place exemplars (or samples) on the continuum as a school. When many teachers are involved, meanings have to be negotiated and common understandings have to be reached. Collecting supporting data became the focus at this stage so that each new evaluator did not have to interpret the descriptors independently. A visual, concrete piece of evidence—or an exemplar that shows what it looks like to

"organize ideas in a logical sequence," for example—would support the descriptors, and any new sample could be matched against the available ones. The samples appropriately labeled "anchor pieces" provide clarity and stability to the language of the descriptors. Our school had a few sessions for teachers to place students' samples on the continuum together. These sessions were time consuming but necessary. The teachers' comments confirmed that. "We need to look at more samples. This is so useful—the picture is becoming clearer." Common meetings highlighted the need for and value of collaboration. "The most difficult and the most rewarding experience is working as a group making common decisions." When a number of exemplars had been collected, and placement was becoming a more precise act, teachers realized that there were many additional dimensions to language, for example, a variety of text types. The teachers began to see that the scope of work to be done was greater than they had anticipated initially. Narrative samples on their own obviously don't give a complete picture of strengths and weaknesses. Children write and read a variety of texts and can be more proficient with one type than with another. The texts that are usually analyzed first are narratives. The texts that students will need to master certainly extend beyond that. In fact, text types that students will use extensively through their learning across the curriculum will become less and less narrative and more formal in style and format.

We are still a long way from having all the necessary assessments in place and instructional practices aligned. However, teachers are beginning to see clearly that continua bring into focus the connectedness of the process of teaching, learning, and assessment. Each assessment, each piece of evidence, is not random but is designed to highlight specific student learning that can be matched with a descriptor or descriptors on the continuum and, at the same time, be related to certain outcomes of the curriculum.

As teachers continue to become familiar with the reading and writing developmental continua, other issues emerge. Most teachers in our school, as well as in many other schools where the developmental continua are at different stages of implementation, agree that it is much easier to bring early elementary (K–2) than upper elementary (3–5) grades on board. Numerous discussions on this issue highlighted a shift in thinking, consolidating toward middle school years, that the developmental aspects of learning are not important anymore. There is less integration of language across the curriculum, and there are fewer opportunities to collect consistent literacy data related to other subject areas. Older children don't make dramatic growth along a continuum of skills and behaviors. They read and write a wider variety of text types, and it is harder to differentiate between higher levels of proficiency. However, many educators believe that older students can be assessed and assisted better through determining their place on a developmental continuum.

Initiative

As we were getting familiar with the continua, it became clear that the descriptors on the reading and writing continua did not provide enough information about second-language learners, nor did they serve as diagnostic tools for ESL teachers. There are certainly similarities in the general direction of native- and second-language development. However, there are many differences as well. Children learning a second language can demonstrate a wide range of literacy skills in their native language or have no literacy background whatsoever. They can have minor glitches in mother-tongue performance, but demonstrate essential difficulties in acquisition of a foreign language. Some children acquire conversational proficiency in no time, while others go through a painful and lengthy process. There is a whole range of constraints and conditions that could affect some or all areas of language and literacy development of a second-language learner. The need for better assessment of these children and clearer approaches to effective teaching is greater than ever.

We decided to create our own literacy continua, including oral language continua, which would complement the classroom continua and be appropriate for our particular purpose. These tools would allow us to create a better and more precise picture of the linguistic development of a child, embrace a broader sense of literacy including oral language, and make enlightened diagnostic judgments. Continua would also

provide a framework for improved assessment, giving a clear direction for collecting evidence and teaching.

Our decision to create language development continua grew out of the need to improve our instructional, assessment, and reporting practices. At the same time it served as a link to the whole-school ESL curriculum. Previous decisions to base the ESL curriculum on stages of second-language development fit very well with the idea of language development continua. We started by determining the number of stages relevant to the elementary school and identifying the descriptors that could speak to the development of language. Looking through professional literature, we were trying to come up with definitions that would best describe a student at a certain stage of development along the lines of three categories that also relate to the curricular outcomes—communicative purposes (what the student is able to do by means of language), linguistic structures and features (vocabulary and grammar), and specific language-learning strategies.

There is a wealth of literature on second-language development, as well as ready-to-use stages and profiles, descriptors, and outcomes. It seems, however, that the benefits of creating materials are many. Among them is the possibility of building a common language and common understandings in the process of collaboration without the need to articulate and explain each descriptor of a ready-made continuum. Collaborative efforts, including research of available professional literature, adoption of common language, and negotiation of meaning, constitute, in the true sense, professional development that stems from common goals, involves a clearly defined plan, and is based on the common needs of students and teachers. Such collaborative effort taps into many areas of knowledge and provides an excellent learning experience.

A draft that emerged as a result of our efforts had to be matched against real students and real language samples to make sure it was usable and determined the essential elements of learning, rather than including every movement along the grammatical or functional sequence. Needless to say, the importance of collecting evidence, supporting samples or "anchor pieces" for the stages on the continuum, came to the fore. We started by verbalizing our mental representations of the learner and then brought in the supporting evidence. I know it is possible to start from the other end by looking at samples, observing and recording student behavior, and then putting the evidence into a sequence (Griffin, Smith, & Martin, 2003). This is a matter of approach to a task, but wherever you start, the importance of aligning the samples and the descriptors cannot be over emphasized.

The work on the continua goes on, as does the work on the ESL curriculum. The elementary language development continua are envisioned as an integral part of the general framework of the ESL curriculum.

It is fair to say that our school has been going through the process of adopting literacy continua rather smoothly, yet with a full view of possible and very real pitfalls and a few painful moments. I am sure we will have more such moments ahead. As teachers continue to expand the knowledge and experience in making continua an integral part of their instructional practice, create new materials, and launch new initiatives, it is important to be realistic about time frames and expectations. Whatever it takes, however, it is a worthwhile endeavor. It serves as a learning experience for the whole school—teachers, administrators, students, and parents. It gives new dimension and meaning to assessing and reporting student progress, and it enriches, guides, and differentiates instruction.

Considerations for various educational settings

As I mentioned before, continua are used in a growing number of schools. They are conducive to differentiated instruction that places value on an individual child's personality, learning style, background knowledge, rate of development, and attitudes toward learning. It seems to me that this framework could be useful in a wider range of linguistic and educational settings. Developmental literacy continua, of course, cannot be simply translated from English, because linguistic and cultural practices in schools around the world are quite different. Educators, however, can start planting the seeds of common understandings about cultural, educational, and philosophical

attitudes of their schools by collecting evidence of essential elements of learning. Developing continua requires strong roots that are based on the commitment of teachers and administrators, an ongoing supply of nutrients, and common professional development and collaborative efforts aimed at alignment of perceptions and practices.

The job of adopting a new educational framework is quite overwhelming, and the steps are quite radical, in many cases involving change in the curricula documents and the mindset of administrators and teachers involved. For the change to happen there must be a strong enough reason, such as addressing the needs of a diverse student population in a better way.

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The sample on the following page, from the writing continuum developed by Campbell Hill (2001), highlights the usefulness and the limitations of this continuum for assessment of second-language learners.

The highlighted descriptors reflect the writing of Hongpeng, a 7-year-old student from China, at the beginning of the year (italics) and in the middle of the year (bold). He started learning English six months ago when he entered summer school at ISB. According to the bold descriptors on the writing continuum, he is writing at grade level—he is where most of the students in his class would be at this time of the year. He has made considerable growth from the beginning to the middle of the year. This is valuable information for the classroom teacher. The completed continuum will help the teacher to design lessons to move Hongpeng along the continuum and teach him to write other text types, organize ideas in a logical sequence, and add description and detail, as well as revise and edit his own work. Hongpeng's writing is quite advanced in terms of mechanics and conventions. The teacher might think of strategies to consolidate and extend these skills. The continuum will also serve as a reporting tool during parent-teacher conferences. The parents will be thrilled to see how much progress their child has made.

From the ESL teacher's point of view, however, the information is incomplete. The continuum fails to pinpoint aspects of writing that relate to Hongpeng's sentence structure, word choice, and spelling, as well as his literacy experience. Hongpeng is literate in his mother tongue and transfers some general cognitive and literacy-related skills and strategies to the new language. Defining these traits of Hongpeng's writing will change the focus from learning to write to learning to write in a second language and help the teacher address Hongpeng's language learning needs in a better way.

Writing continuum

Preconventional
Ages 3–5

- ☐ Relies primarily on pictures to convey meaning.
- ☐ Begins to label and add "words" to pictures.
- ☐ Writes first name.
- ☐ Demonstrates awareness that print conveys meaning.
- ☐ Makes marks other than drawing on paper (scribbles).
- ☐ Writes random recognizable letters to represent words.
- ☐ Tells about own pictures and writing.

Emerging
Ages 4–6

- ☐ *Uses pictures and print to convey meaning.*
- ☐ *Writes words to describe or support pictures.*
- ☐ Copies signs, labels, names, and words (environmental print).
- ☐ *Demonstrates understanding of letter/sound relationship.*
- ☐ Prints with upper case letters.
- ☐ *Matches letters to sounds.*
- ☐ Uses beginning consonants to make words.
- ☐ Uses beginning and ending consonants to make words.
- ☐ Pretends to read own writing.
- ☐ *Sees self as writer.*
- ☐ *Takes risks with writing.*

Developing
Ages 5–7

- ☐ Writes 1-2 sentences about a topic.
- ☐ *Writes names and familiar words.*
- ☐ **Generates own ideas for writing.**
- ☐ *Writes from top to bottom, left to right, and front to back.*
- ☐ Intermixes upper and lower case letters.
- ☐ Experiments with capitals.
- ☐ **Experiments with punctuation.**
- ☐ Begins to use spacing between words.
- ☐ *Uses growing awareness of sound segments (e.g., phonemes, syllables, rhymes) to write words.*
- ☐ Spells words on the basis of sounds without regard for conventional spelling patterns.
- ☐ Uses beginning, middle, and ending sounds to make words.
- ☐ Begins to read own writing.

Beginning
Ages 6–8

- ☐ **Writes several sentences about a topic.**
- ☐ **Writes about observations and experiences.**
- ☐ Writes short nonfiction pieces (simple facts about a topic) with guidance.
- ☐ Chooses own writing topics.
- ☐ Reads own writing and notices mistakes with guidance.
- ☐ Revises by adding details with guidance.
- ☐ *Uses spacing between words consistently.*
- ☐ *Forms most letters legibly.*
- ☐ **Writes pieces that self and others can read.**
- ☐ **Uses phonetic spelling to write independently.**
- ☐ **Spells simple words and some high frequency words correctly.**
- ☐ **Begins to use periods and capital letters correctly.**
- ☐ Shares own writing with others.

Expanding
Ages 7–9

- ☐ Writes short fiction and poetry with guidance.
- ☐ Writes a variety of short nonfiction pieces (e.g., facts about a topic, letters, lists) with guidance.
- ☐ Writes with a central idea.
- ☐ Writes using complete sentences.
- ☐ Organizes ideas in a logical sequence in fiction and nonfiction writing with guidance.
- ☐ Begins to recognize and use interesting language.
- ☐ Uses several prewriting strategies (e.g., web, brainstorm) with guidance.
- ☐ Listens to others' writing and offers feedback.
- ☐ Begins to consider suggestions from others about own writing.
- ☐ Adds description and detail with guidance.
- ☐ Edits for capitals and punctuation with guidance.
- ☐ Publishes own writing with guidance.
- ☐ Writes legibly.
- ☐ Spells most high frequency words correctly and moves toward conventional spelling.
- ☐ Identifies own writing strategies and sets goals with guidance

Bridging
Ages 8–10

- ☐ Writes about feelings and opinions.
- ☐ Writes fiction with clear beginning, middle, and end.
- ☐ Writes poetry using carefully chosen language with guidance.
- ☐ Writes organized nonfiction pieces (e.g., reports, letters, and lists) with guidance.
- ☐ Begins to use paragraphs to organize ideas.
- ☐ Uses strong verbs, interesting language, and dialogue with guidance.
- ☐ Seeks feedback on writing.
- ☐ Revises for clarity with guidance.
- ☐ Revises to enhance ideas by adding description and detail.
- ☐ Uses resources (e.g., thesaurus and word lists) to make writing more effective with guidance.
- ☐ Edits for punctuation, spelling, and grammar.
- ☐ Publishes writing in polished format with guidance.
- ☐ Increases use of visual strategies, spelling rules, and knowledge of word parts to spell correctly.
- ☐ Uses commas and apostrophes correctly with guidance.
- ☐ Uses criteria for effective writing to set own writing goals with guidance.

Fluent
Ages 9–11

- ☐ Begins to write organized fiction and nonfiction (e.g., reports, letters, biographies, and autobiographies).
- ☐ Develops stories with plots that include problems and solutions with guidance.
- ☐ Creates characters in stories with guidance.
- ☐ Writes poetry using carefully chosen language.
- ☐ Begins to experiment with sentence length and complex sentence structure.
- ☐ Varies leads and endings with guidance.
- ☐ Uses description, details, and similes with guidance.
- ☐ Uses dialogue with guidance.
- ☐ Uses a range of strategies for planning writing.
- ☐ Adapts writing for purpose and audience with guidance.
- ☐ Revises for specific writing traits (e.g., ideas, organization, word choice, sentence fluency, voice, and conventions) with guidance.
- ☐ Incorporates suggestions from others about own writing with guidance.
- ☐ Edits for punctuation, spelling, and grammar with greater precision.
- ☐ Uses tools (e.g., dictionaries, word lists, and spell checkers) to edit with guidance.
- ☐ Develops criteria for effective writing in different genres with guidance.

Proficient
Ages 10–13

- ☐ Writes persuasively about ideas, feelings, and opinions.
- ☐ Creates plots with problems and solutions.
- ☐ Begins to develop the main characters and describe detailed settings.
- ☐ Begins to write organized and fluent nonfiction, including simple bibliographies.
- ☐ Writes cohesive paragraphs including reasons and examples with guidance.
- ☐ Uses transitional sentences to connect paragraphs.
- ☐ Varies sentence structure, leads, and endings.
- ☐ Begins to use descriptive language, details, and similes.
- ☐ Uses voice to evoke emotional response from readers.
- ☐ Begins to integrate information on a topic from a variety of sources.
- ☐ Begins to revise for specific writing traits (e.g., ideas, organization, word choice, sentence fluency, voice, and conventions).
- ☐ Uses tools (e.g., dictionaries, word lists, spell checkers) to edit independently.
- ☐ Selects and publishes writing in polished format independently.
- ☐ Begins to use complex punctuation (e.g., commas, colons, semicolons, quotation marks) appropriately.
- ☐ Begins to set goals and identify strategies to improve writing in different genres.

Connecting
Ages 11–14

- ☐ Writes in a variety of genres and forms for different audiences and purposes independently.
- ☐ Creates plots with a climax.
- ☐ Creates detailed, believable settings and characters in stories.
- ☐ Writes organized, fluent, and detailed nonfiction independently, including bibliographies with correct format.
- ☐ Writes cohesive paragraphs including supportive reasons and examples.
- ☐ Uses descriptive language, details, similes, and imagery to enhance ideas independently.
- ☐ Begins to use dialogue to enhance character development.
- ☐ Incorporates personal voice in writing with increasing frequency.
- ☐ Integrates information on a topic from a variety of sources independently.
- ☐ Constructs charts, graphs, and tables to convey information when appropriate.
- ☐ Uses prewriting strategies effectively to organize and strengthen writing.
- ☐ Revises for specific writing traits (e.g., ideas, organization, word choice, sentence fluency, voice, and conventions) independently.
- ☐ Includes deletion in revision strategies.
- ☐ Incorporates suggestions from others on own writing independently.
- ☐ Uses complex punctuation (e.g., commas, colons, semicolons, quotation marks) with increasing accuracy.

Independent

- ☐ Writes organized, fluent, accurate, and in-depth nonfiction, including references with correct bibliographic format.
- ☐ Writes cohesive, fluent, and effective poetry and fiction.
- ☐ Uses a clear sequence of paragraphs with effective transitions.
- ☐ Begins to incorporate literary devices (e.g., imagery, metaphors, personification, and foreshadowing).
- ☐ Weaves dialogue effectively into stories.
- ☐ Develops plots, characters, setting, and mood (literary elements) effectively.
- ☐ Begins to develop personal voice and style of writing.
- ☐ Revises through multiple drafts independently.
- ☐ Seeks feedback from others and incorporates suggestions in order to strengthen own writing.
- ☐ Publishes writing for different audiences and purposes in polished format independently.
- ☐ Internalizes writing process.
- ☐ Uses correct grammar (e.g., subject/verb agreement and verb tense) consistently.
- ☐ Writes with confidence and competence on a range of topics independently.
- ☐ Perseveres through complex or challenging writing projects independently.
- ☐ Sets writing goals independently by analyzing and evaluating own writing.

Roberta L. Ross-Fisher

Using simulations as tools to promote more powerful learning

"Hey, Simone! Look! I found another artifact!"
"Yeah! Me too! This is SO much fun!"

The temperature may have been nearly 90 degrees Fahrenheit that day, but my seventh- and eighth-grade students didn't seem to mind at all. Beads of sweat poured down their faces, they were covered from head to toe in dirt, and they were having the time of their lives. For a while at least, they even forgot they were actually *learning*—but learn they did. My students had been studying about ancient civilizations and how various aspects of their respective cultures had been created over the years. One day one of my brightest, most inquisitive thinkers raised a question. She asked, "How do you think those people back then really created their own civilizations? Why don't people create civilizations today?" This piqued the interest of my other students, and with their input a major class project was born. Here is an overview of the activity:

- First, students in this particular class loved the thrill of competition, and so they decided that they wanted to form two teams. Each team chose a name as well as the fictional place where it was from, and this generated further interest and excitement.
- Each team was assigned the task of creating its own civilization. This included creating a governmental structure, political divisions, a monetary system, religions or faith traditions, sources of food, and a spoken and written language as well as music, art, and recreation. These were the basic requirements, but they could add more elements to their civilization if they desired.
- Each team was to work apart from the other; I was fortunate to have access to an extra classroom so that each of my teams could have its own private working space under my supervision.
- After developing their civilization, members of each team were expected to create artifacts that would represent various aspects of their civilization—these artifacts would be used in a mock archaeological dig as a culmination activity.
- Prior to the dig, however, each team was required to generate a set of clever clues about its civilization that would be partially explained when the artifacts were discovered and viewed. The teams would exchange the clues in advance of the dig and attempt to generate a thinking map or graphic organizer representing a visual image of what they believed about their competitors' created civilization.
- The culminating activity took place at the home of one of my students' parents, who kindly agreed to donate a piece of the family garden plot to serve as the site of the mock archaeological dig. The plot was divided in half, and each team was instructed to bury the artifacts that its members had created. As artifacts were discovered, team members tried to compare their thinking map with the artifacts; when finished, they had to re-create the civilization of the other team.

- At the end of the day's activities, teams then checked each other's work and let their competitors know how close they came to accurately discovering the civilization they had created.

This is but one example of a simulation—an open-ended, challenging project that requires the active involvement of students from start to finish and helps them to develop their higher level thinking skills. As teachers, we are always looking for ways to improve the instructional opportunities we afford our students. We desire to find ways to create powerful learning experiences that are meaningful and relevant and that help to stimulate higher level thinking skills to better prepare students for their future. On the basis of my experiences over 25 years in education, I am convinced that simulations can be used quite effectively to accomplish these goals.

Simulation: A formal definition

While many definitions exist, for the purposes of this article a simulation may be defined as a problem-solving exercise that is undertaken collaboratively and may be resolved through a combination of character identification, shared decision making, investigative inquiry, and reflective practice within a scenario context; simulations vary in length from a few days to a few weeks and are appropriate for virtually all grade and ability levels. While simulations are really limited only to a teacher's or a group of students' imaginations, there are two primary forms that are most commonly seen:

- Traditional role-playing: Commercially produced theme-based booklets or kits, or teacher-made materials
- Computer-based or assisted: Makes use of technology either to a major or minor extent
- Multimedia: Relies heavily on sophisticated animation graphics and audio and video features
- WebQuests: Inquiry-driven investigations that are primarily grounded in Internet websites

Benefits of simulations

1. *Improved performance on standardized tests*. Wenglinsky (1998) determined that mathematics classes that used computer simulations produced significant gains on standardized tests as compared with classrooms that used computers strictly for skill-drill activities. Many standardized tests now place a greater emphasis on the application of knowledge and skills as well as on problem solving, which are at the heart of simulations.

2. *Learning is more interesting and meaningful*. Because simulations focus on topics of interest to students and involve rich plots and characters, students tend to become more actively engaged and remain on task throughout the unit of study. They are active participants, as opposed to passive recipients, in the learning process.

3. *Knowledge is easily scaffolded*. Because skills and concepts are not taught in isolation from each other, students are able to effectively build upon what they learn to create even more knowledge. Simulations are taught from an interdisciplinary, cross-curricular approach, and a single simulation may likely contain substantial components of reading, writing, language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, art, music, and rhythm/movement.

4. *Reading and writing skills are strengthened*. Students typically must read both orally and silently and keep a daily journal over the course of most simulations. To that end, their skills in those areas tend to improve as a result of the extended practice. One wonderful example of how journals can be used either as an introduction to or as an integral component of a simulation is a weblog, which represents a diary published on the Internet. Regan (2003) describes how older students can enjoy the Diary of Samuel Pepys, which spans a 10-year period during the 17th century in Britain and is presented online as a weblog, while students of all ages can learn a great deal from journals, snapshots, and recorded voices of individuals and events throughout history from all over the world through the EyeWitness to History website (links to these sites are listed at the end of this article).

   Another example of how simulations can serve to support and strengthen reading and writing skills is when my fourth-grade students completed a

simulation called The Princess and Her Court. In this simulation, I asked each of my students to take on a specific role or characterization. For example, Erica was the princess, Tyrell was the prince, Samuel served as the caretaker, Molly agreed to be the princess's handmaiden, and so forth. Students had to create their own characters, make them rich in detail and background, and then "introduce" themselves to the rest of the "court." Once this was done, they were given a problem that was to take place within their kingdom. Working collaboratively, they had to find ways in which to successfully solve the problem. Once this was done, I required them to write down exactly what happened, what they tried, and what the results were, and then they were asked to create a script for a play based on their experiences in this exercise. They did so, and, as a culmination, we videotaped the class members dramatizing the script they had created. The video was shown to parents, and the reactions were priceless.

5. *Higher level thinking and problem-solving skills are emphasized*. In some ways, simulations are similar to techniques used in the Mystery Strategy. Hanson, Schwartz, Silver, and Strong (1996) described the Mystery Strategy as using content that is of interest to students and presented as a mystery to be solved. An example of the Mystery Strategy being used in a simulation is when my seventh and eighth graders drafted clever clues in an attempt to make it difficult for the competing team to easily determine the details of the civilization they had just created. Those students who engage in this particular strategy utilize their higher level thinking skills as they "continuously evaluate by reflection on how they analyzed and interpreted data, how they inferred points, and how logic was used to solve the mystery before them" (p. 63). Another skill derived from the use of simulations is that of cause and effect; students learn this concept because they will be required to make many decisions due to problems that have been built into the simulation design. As a result of those decisions, which are typically made cooperatively within a group, the "lives" of their own characters as well as others will be affected, and subsequent positive or negative results will follow. To that end, students will improve their skills in higher order thinking, such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. My fourth graders who participated in The Princess and Her Court definitely learned problem-solving skills as they (a) worked in groups to decide upon ways in which to solve the problem and (b) collaboratively wrote a script that would be enacted later.

Steps in creating a simulation

There is no reason why classroom teachers cannot develop their own simulations, either on their own or within a small group of grade-level colleagues. Regardless of whether the simulation is going to be the computer-based model or the traditional role-play model, there are some basic processes teachers would be advised to consider.

1. Ask the question, "What do I want my students to know and be able to do?" This essential question should steer the entire unit of study, and the answer will provide the groundwork for a rubric or scoring guide used to evaluate specific aspects of student performance on the simulation.

2. Think about how the simulation you are creating will assist your students as they prepare for end-of-year assessments.

3. Create a scenario. Just as if you were writing a story, create various elements that will be necessary for a motivating simulation.
   a. *Interesting characters* (enough for each student in your class or a group). Identify each character's name, age, profession, family status, and any other pertinent information so that each of your students will be able to "connect" with a character and assume that character's identity during the course of the simulation. For example, "Zeke Thornbush: 24-year-old married farmer with three children; he raises cattle and does blacksmithing in his spare time."
   b. *Setting*. When does the simulation take place (date/time/era)? What is the simulation's location? To provide

an example that coincides with the character "Zeke" above, a setting might be southern Missouri (USA) in 1887.

c. *Plot*. Provide an overview of the scenario. What are the main ideas and details that will make things interesting and exciting for your students?

d. *Overarching major problem(s)*. Identify at least one significant problem that students will need to solve collaboratively.

e. *Minor problem(s)*. Establish twists and turns throughout the scenario that require students to make decisions and then figuratively reap the rewards of good decisions or suffer the consequences of poor ones.

f. *Resolution to the problem(s)*. The problems in the scenario will be based upon choices students make. In some ways, this is similar to an interactive book.

g. *Conclusion*. Design an appropriate culminating activity to bring the simulation to a conclusion. An example would be the mock archaeological dig that my seventh and eighth graders participated in or the play that my fourth graders enacted.

4. On the basis of what you expect your students to know and be able to do as a result of this simulation, create a rubric or scoring guide with which to evaluate your students' performance, as well as your own level of teaching effectiveness.

5. Now look at the entire scenario you have created. Identify which subject areas could easily be included in this unit of study; this is where an integrated curriculum can be formed and interdisciplinary studies engaged.

Role of the teacher during the simulation

The teacher facilitates the simulation and serves as a learning coach rather than an imparter of knowledge. Students will be active learners, with the opportunity for a lot of shared decision making. The teacher's main role takes place in the preparation stage of the simulation, making sure it is appropriate for his or her students. The teacher may decide how student groups should be formed, or may allow students to make these decisions. If problems or questions arise, the teacher encourages students to resolve issues collaboratively at least three times before seeking help from the teacher. This emphasizes the importance of working together as a peer group to solve problems and make decisions.

A technological twist to the simulation

While most simulations typically are completed within a single classroom of students, it is possible to take advantage of existing technology and have two classrooms participate in the simulation via e-mail or chat-room communication. This would enable students to think and solve problems in ways that perhaps they have not experienced before.

After the simulation concludes

After your students have completed the simulation, it is important to have a debriefing opportunity, whereby students would be asked to provide feedback about the experience. This would be a good opportunity to break the whole class apart into a grouping structure, such as a task group (Canter & Associates, 1996) of approximately four students per group. Ask them to think about the simulation in which they just participated and to consider the following questions:

1. What are the most important things you learned from our simulation, and why do you view your choices as being valuable?

2. What would you still like to know about this topic?

3. You know that simulations are not real—they are "pretend" activities to help us learn about specific topics. In your groups, I'd like you to talk about how the simulation we just completed compares with reality. For example, how could a simulation that focuses on pioneers be different from our actually living in the 1800s and traveling on the Oregon Trail?

Each task group should appoint a recorder to take notes as students consider and discuss the assigned questions, and a speaker for each group should also be chosen. At the end of 30 to 45 minutes the discussion should draw to a close, and the class should come back together as a

whole group. Those appointed as speakers for each task group would share their peers' collective responses. A whole-class graphic organizer could then be created that presents a visual overview of the responses given. Students could then be encouraged to write a summary of their own experiences and personal insights as a result of the simulation experience.

Let the creativity continue!

After students have completed at least one simulation exercise, have them work either individually or in small groups to create the shell for a new simulation. The classroom teacher will have the benefit of simulation scenarios that are timely and relevant; they will be student centered, created by students, for students. This can be accomplished either by soliciting ideas and suggestions via whole-group discussions or by students writing ideas down and submitting them to the teacher. If students are particularly adept at creating problem-based scenarios, they could also be assigned to work in small groups to create a simulation for another class.

Useful simulation resources

There are many fine resources available to help teachers use and create simulations within their own classrooms; a few of these resources are shown below.

www.eyewitnesstohistory.com
This site contains a wealth of information useful for creating or completing simulations; it presents recorded voices, snapshots, simulated journals, and diaries pertaining to a wide variety of events throughout world history.

www.fordham.edu/halsall/IHSP-travelers.html
This site presents some wonderful accounts of travelers from all over the world through various periods in history. It could serve as a rich source for helping students view historical events through the eyes or writings of someone who actually experienced what they have learned about in history books.

www.geocities.com/mrdglhs/cygnus/index.html
This site represents what one high school in Ohio (USA) is doing in web-based, interactive science simulations. Project Cygnus is a simulated robotic exploration of Mars and works from a team approach.

http://froggy.lbl.gov/virtual
Virtual Frog Dissection Kit is a website that teachers and students could easily use as a stand-alone simulation or as a component of a larger simulation.

http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/index.html
This site is sponsored by the Library of Congress and represents its American Memory Archive; a wealth of wonderful teaching ideas can be found here.

www.spa3.k12.sc.us/WebQuests.html
A school district in South Carolina (USA) has developed a wonderful website that focuses on the development and use of WebQquests for the classroom. It is filled with lots of practical ideas and resources for teachers at all grade levels.

http://www.pbs.org/teachersource
This is a rich website produced by the U.S. Public Broadcasting Service that contains some wonderful resources for teachers, including actual lesson plans written by teachers that could easily be adapted into simulations. Moreover, the site contains multimedia and other quality sources of information teachers can access.

www.pepysdiary.com
Samuel Pepys was a 17th-century Englishman whose life's adventures are shared via a weblog published by Phil Gyford. A site such as this one would provide a rich foundation for a simulation.

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Of bones and birds:
Ten hints for writing instruction

Like most teachers of my generation, I received undergraduate training that did not include extensive coverage in the methods of teaching writing. I was required to complete the obligatory composition classes included in the university's general education requirements, along with a class on language arts methods. In these classes students wrote essays and term papers. We were introduced to handwriting programs and language arts textbooks and, as an added bonus, we wrote haiku poetry and created our own children's books. However, at no point did my professional education classes address practical "how-to" methods of teaching writing to students.

A dilemma

Times change, policymakers change, trends change, and the educational pendulum swings. During my teaching career, I have survived the pendulum swing of educational reform, and, as a seasoned teacher, I have learned not to jump on the first bandwagon in the parade—to worry less about trends and more about what and how my students learn. During the past few years, educational reforms have brought us criterion-referenced, open-response, high-stakes testing. These tests require writing on demand, while most classrooms follow the longer writing process of drafting, editing, rewriting, and publishing. I found myself a bit overwhelmed by it all, drowning in a sea of prepackaged, cookie-cutter, quick-fix writing programs guaranteed to provide success in writing performance. I needed a plan—one that ignored the testing and marketing rhetoric and focused on helping students become proficient writers.

Planning

The first phase of this plan involved developing my own writing skills. I began this experience by reading more. An avid reader since childhood, I challenged myself by reading classics as well as a diverse array of genres. This exploration of genres helped me gain an appreciation of a broad range of writing techniques and styles. In particular, I explored poetry by reading it, subscribing to poetry journals, and attending poetry conferences. I soon realized that to teach writing to others, I needed first to attempt to master the process by developing my own writing skills. I finally took the most obvious step and began to write. I bought a small journal and experimented by jotting down writing ideas; and then I began writing poetry, short stories, personal observations, and reflections. I began to truly understand that writing is a process, not just a finished product.

The next phase of planning involved my classroom. Through the years, I have tried to develop a classroom environment where students felt free to experiment and explore. Following a reading/writing workshop approach, each class period, though planned, had a loose structure that allowed the group to monitor and adjust as necessary in order to explore new ideas and take advantage of teachable moments. During reading/writing workshop time, students were reading, writing, and discussing. I functioned as a facilitator, moving between groups and joining in the activity. This might mean I would be sitting on the floor reading silently, editing a piece of writing for a student, teaching a minilesson to a small group, or participating in a literature circle discussion of a

young adult novel. Again, I believe in planning. Successful reading/writing workshops take much more planning than having students sit and read or write to complete a specific assignment. The new plan was to expand on this classroom structure and become a more active writing model and participant while maintaining the role of facilitator.

Modeling

I have always believed reading aloud provides an appropriate model, but the value of demonstrating a consistent writing model for students to emulate had never occurred to me. Because my classroom was already organized with this loose structure, I was able to expand on my self-exploration of writing by participating in writing activities with my students during class. Upon reflection I realized that my 12th-grade English teacher had done this when she wrote in and read from her own journal during my high school days years ago. When I gave a writing assignment, I wrote too, participating right along with my students in every stage of the writing process: brainstorming, drafting, proofing, and editing. This simple act broke down barriers between my students and me, their teacher, and produced positive outcomes. I was now able to share in the anxiety and vulnerability accompanying editing sessions. By putting my writing on the table for critique, I was taking the same chances as my students, albeit on a smaller scale. While the students were initially hesitant to offer suggestions, gradually, with encouragement, they treated my offerings like any other before them. In fact, they took great pride in pointing out suggestions. In addition, this gave me the opportunity to model the writing process. Previously, my students viewed editing and rewriting as some sort of writing punishment. Through my modeling, students came to realize that adults, even teachers, edit and rewrite as a legitimate part of the process and not as a punishment or just to keep busy. They came to realize this is what "real" writers do.

Resources

As my interest in writing and writing instruction grew, I discovered several books that offered advice for writers. The two books I found to be most valuable were *Writing Down the Bones* by Natalie Goldberg (1986, Shambhala) and *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott (1994, Anchor). In these books the authors provide practical, straightforward advice for honing the writer's craft. I have searched for practical books that would provide comparable advice for students, but have found few.

It occurred to me one day that although some of the content of the two books was not age appropriate, the core information was still applicable to the classroom environment I had worked to establish. This environment, based on my belief in experience as education, operated on the premise that I was a facilitator of activities and not the final authority. Together, we all experienced the act and art of writing. Students in my classroom were encouraged not just to listen to me discuss writing, but rather to participate fully in the experience. The simple lessons contained in each book provide valuable information to guide the writing events of my students. In this article, I have selected and condensed what I believe to be the books' best pieces of advice. This advice can help all students become better writers.

Ten hints for writing instruction

1. Your writing equipment is important.

Goldberg encourages writers to consider writing equipment carefully, comparing it to a carpenter's tools. This does not mean that writing well requires expensive equipment, but rather that equipment that excites the writer can raise self-confidence and enthusiasm. An inexpensive, fast-writing pen might free the hand to get ideas on paper more quickly than a blunt pencil. Also, writers may be more excited about writing in a journal if the cover is decorated with a favorite cartoon character or teen heartthrob. Small things can make the task of writing more exciting.

2. Writing is about taking one step at a time.

Lamott tells the story of a time when her younger brother, having procrastinated on writing a report on birds, was complaining about the task at hand. Their father, an author in his own right, gave the boy some simple advice: "Write the report bird by bird." Take it one step at a time. This is a

great lesson for writers who sometimes consider writing a daunting task. I have known young writers who wanted to complete the entire writing process in one class period. It is often important to break down the process into smaller, more manageable parts.

3. Writing is about getting words on the paper.

Goldberg tells writers that an important part of the writing process is simply getting the words on the paper, or "writing down the bones" with the aim of getting the first thought down on paper. She recommends ignoring internal editors and focusing on being the creator. Lamott agrees, adding it's important to get the first draft on paper by any means necessary. The first draft could be referred to a "down draft" (just get it down). The second draft is called the "up draft" (when it's fixed up), and the third draft is the "dental draft" (when every tooth is checked to see if it's loose, cramped, or decayed). This is a simple way to envision and remember the writing process.

4. Begin writing with short assignments.

Both authors agree that it is important to start writing with short assignments. Lamott believes the basic unit of writing practice is a timed exercise, starting with short periods of time and then increasing it. Writers should commit themselves for the full amount of time and do the following during the exercise:

- Keep writing hand moving
- Don't cross out
- Don't worry about spelling, punctuation or grammar
- Lose control
- Don't think; don't be logical
- Dive into writing

5. Writing gets better with practice.

Goldberg compares writing to running—the more an individual practices, the more accomplished he or she becomes. She also states that while the large amount of time athletes practice is never questioned, most writers do not allow themselves the same amount of time to write. I was fortunate to work for a principal who realized the importance of writing and, through creative scheduling and teaming between teachers, provided time needed for writing.

Photo: PhotoDisc, Inc.

6. Writing details is important.

Lamott emphasizes the importance of details by explaining that the writer of a piece of work will not be with the reader of that piece to fill in missing details with specifics. The details must be in the writing. Goldberg refers to details as the basic units of writing. Writers will sometimes add more detail if classroom peers are trained to ask questions as audience members. This training can help fill in the gaps in detail. As writers learn to engage

actively with a text during critique sessions, they will come to realize how vocabulary and sentence complexity work to produce a more complete and detailed piece of writing.

7. Becoming a better writer makes you a better reader.

Lamott insists that becoming a better writer helps one become a better reader, calling this the great payoff of writing. Once students appreciate writing, they will read with the eye of a writer and build a greater appreciation for the written word. This idea became evident when my students began to critique the writing in some of the novels being read in class. Students would pretend the author was a member of the class, asking questions and giving opinions about the writing contained in the novel.

8. Writing means making mistakes.

Lamott calls perfectionism an enemy to writing and a cause of good writing being ruined. She encourages writers to make mistakes, believing that trying to ensure there is no mess to clean up later blocks the flow and energy of the initial act of writing. Many student writers get caught in this trap. Attempts to reach perfection on the first draft often result in short and uninteresting products. Ironically, this first-draft mentality is reinforced by most high-stakes testing programs that require writing on demand.

9. Create a list of writing ideas.

Goldberg encourages writers to create and maintain a list of ideas for later writing. This list can be a valuable resource whenever encountering a bout of writer's block. For example, she suggests that, when all else fails, write about food, because everyone has very specific thoughts about how a favorite food tastes and is prepared.

All writing needs to be authentic—that is, not an assignment just contrived to get a written response. Students in my classroom were encouraged to maintain a list of ideas for later writing, thus allowing them to choose to write something personally meaningful. For example, a student might have the idea to write a letter to a famous author or athlete, or to write and illustrate a picture story to share with a younger sibling. These lists of authentic ideas, created by the students, provide a great resource to encourage writing.

10. Writing can be hard work.

Both authors agree that, in the end, writing takes persistence and can be hard work. This is not meant to discourage writers, but rather to help build an understanding that writing, like all worthwhile pursuits, is not always an easy task, but the rewards can be fulfilling.

As a teacher, I have faced many challenges as expectations for my teaching changed throughout the years. Writing, a skill I thought I had mastered in high school, has become one of the most personally challenging subjects for me to teach. Again, I'm sure the lack of importance placed on writing instruction while in college played a role in the difficulty I have experienced over the past few years. My personal journey into writing, however, has been tremendously gratifying. I am intrinsically rewarded by the pieces I create in my own journal, by the pieces my students create, and by the excitement my students display when they truly enjoy the writing process. This journey could not have been complete without the help of my "friends" Natalie Goldberg and Anne Lamott. I hope the 10 simple suggestions gleaned from their works can be applied to classrooms everywhere, but, most of all, I hope teachers seek out the works of these authors and begin a journey like mine of growth and reflection on writing instruction.

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Picture Story as a creative connection between reading and writing:

The Nigerian experience

Literacy learning opportunities that take into account the social and cultural context of the learner are expected to be more productive than those that do not. Such opportunities not only are less threatening but also tend to reduce the chances of "literacy shocks" for the learner, while enhancing a gradual transformation from the preliterate to literate stage and from reading to writing.

Most African communities (including Nigeria) have a rich oral tradition, which is evident in storytelling, oratory, and oracular pronouncements. In formal as well as in informal education, especially in indigenous communities, storytelling (as opposed to story *reading*) is employed as a resource for promoting sociocultural integration and learning. This is because many Nigerian languages at present exist only in their oral forms and have not developed standard orthographies, nor have they attained an official status. The oral medium, therefore, is the most extensively used among a large segment of the Nigerian population.

It is evident that the transformation from a speaking culture to a writing culture might not be smooth if resources for such a transition are not carefully selected. In this article we report on how the transition from reading to writing was made through the medium of the Picture Story. The opportunity for oral reading of pictures led to shared reading and then to individual reading and writing.

Perhaps it is the recognition that writing is an essential skill in the school curriculum, and that learners encounter many difficulties in acquiring the skill, which informed the call for a writing revolution, as advocated by a report produced by the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges entitled *The Neglected "R": The Need for a Writing Revolution* (see *Reading Today*, June/July 2003, p. 4).

Picture books in literacy learning

The connection between reading and writing is well documented (Garvie, 1990; Teale & Yokota, 2000). Although reading is categorized as a receptive and writing as an expressive skill, Aboderin (1985) has shown how reading can facilitate the acquisition of the expressive skill of writing. What appears not to have been sufficiently articulated is the fact that "reading" wordless books and sharing the stories with and among children offer a strong motivation for reading and writing among all children—"struggling readers, hesitant readers, readers with disability, and ESL readers" (Scala, 2001, p. 72).

Writing may well be the most difficult task that a teacher can place before children (Furr, 2003). Therefore, to develop writing skills teachers need to adopt the least threatening means possible, blending fun with learning. Picture Story provides one such opportunity that we have tried and found to be highly productive in getting children involved in book-writing activities.

To justify the relevance of picture books, Tiedt (2000) provided a list of picture books that won the Randolph J. Caldecott Award, given by the American Library Association, from 1938 to 2000. The list clearly shows that wordless picture storybooks have been in use in the United States for a long time. Beyond that, it also indicates that the

use of picture books in the development and promotion of literacy is well acknowledged.

Picture storybooks may come with simple text, with little or no printed text, or in poster form without printed text. Whatever the form, Tiedt (2000) pointed out that Picture Story helps to stimulate thinking, speaking, listening, reading, writing, and media literacy in the classroom. Because they are excellent means of developing total literacy, picture books are rich resources in the hands of an effective teacher. To demonstrate the extensive use to which Picture Story can be put, Tiedt (2000) identified the following possibilities inherent in picture stories:

- presenting and sharing part of a people's heritage
- explaining interesting information about different cultures
- promoting the mother tongue
- developing a sensitivity to stereotypes
- modeling sound patterns of language
- fostering a love of books

To these possibilities we have added some of the uses that have developed from our own experience of using picture stories with children:

- stimulating the writing and illustration of original books for children by children
- teaching outlining/summary skills
- appreciating sequencing
- presenting provocative topics that stimulate reflection
- encouraging students to use language
- introducing oral language activities
- making learning and teaching exciting and pleasurable
- developing rapport with students, fostering a sense of community, and encouraging teamwork
- drawing out reluctant children in positive, non-threatening ways
- teaching grammar, style, spelling, and vocabulary
- guiding students to appreciate literary genres
- exploring perspectives to discover the full picture
- suggesting creative art activities: drawing, molding, pasting, dancing, and miming
- introducing cross-curricular activities

Oyetunde and Umolu (1991) underscored the importance of Picture Story as a catalyst in the process of developing descriptive and sequencing skills, which are necessary for writing effectively. Besides, wordless posters help students appreciate and deepen their understanding of diversity, stimulate creativity, and help create children's books.

Unfortunately, the use of picture stories is not widespread in Nigerian primary schools. Perhaps the READ Picture Story packs, developed by the Read, Educate, and Develop Educational Trust of South Africa (READ) and distributed to some schools in Nigeria in 1999, provided the first ever such experience for teachers and pupils in the Nigerian educational system.

Because reading is not regarded as a separate subject in the school curriculum, it currently resides in the language arts classroom of primary school. However, teachers who have used Picture Story, whether in book or poster form, know that the material offers inexhaustible opportunities for learners' literacy skills development.

Through Picture Story, children, especially young learners, are able to make the connection between picture and print, helping them to improve thinking skills such as sequencing, predicting, and relating cause and effect. Thus, pupils interact with the pictures through speaking (telling a story), and move on to write stories based on the pictures they have "read."

Writing on the usefulness of the material even at the secondary school level in the content areas, Carr, Buchanan, Wentz, Weiss, and Brant (2000) observed that picture books "increase aesthetic enjoyment for all students" and are "especially appealing to visual learners" (p. 147). They also have been found to enhance motivation, comprehension, and aesthetic appreciation, while catering to the needs of the less able reader. The current presentation is restricted to how Picture Story helps to forge a link between reading and writing, and how children are trained not only to appreciate the process of writing but also to share in the task of book production through what they write. The Picture Story exercise was driven by the conviction that "Writing and talk about writing need to be made common…early in the children's career as readers, learners and writers" (Hansen, 2001, p. 51).

Because the child is a resource in the procurement of content and generation of ideas for literacy development (Bromley, 2000; Ekpe, 1993; Garvie, 1990; Hansen, 2001; Schneider & Jackson, 2000), it is our belief that picture stories are useful in stimulating children to exercise not only their speaking but also their writing skills, and thereby *generate* the content of books from their experience of the world.

Children learn not only from *what* they are taught, but also from *how* they are taught: from both the *process* and the *content* (Eisner, 1982, in Semali, 2001). Therefore, the intentional teaching of reading in an interactive and collaborative manner, especially in a pleasant, relaxed atmosphere with plenty of good humor, develops young writers' skills and models choices for them (Bromley, 2000). In Garvie's (1990) words:

> The growth-points for literacy are to be found in oracy, and the more the children have been stimulated to listen and speak by a story, the more easily the skills of reading and writing can be developed as the story carries the children along. (p. 105)

The READ Picture Story packs

The READ Picture Story pack is a language learning resource developed by READ. The packs include a number of titles produced for use in primary school classrooms. Each Picture Story pack contains the following items:

> Eight story posters (with guide questions and serial numbers on the teachers' side); eight Little Books (picture books of the same stories without the questions, arranged serially on pages numbered 1–8, used for group or individual work by the pupils); and one Teacher's Guide.

The packs were donated to the Reading Association of Nigeria (RAN) for distribution in Nigerian primary schools as a part of a nationwide literacy pilot project between 1999 and 2000, specifically targeting schools in rural areas. The project began with a training workshop conducted by a READ representative for selected members of RAN. After the project closed in 2000, some leftover materials continued to be useful to RAN in its literacy promotion efforts at the headquarters of the project in Calabar, especially during the Vacation Reading Programme (VRP) held annually during the long vacations between June and September. During VRPs, RAN members interact directly with children who come from different schools both inside and outside Calabar.

The Picture Story title received for distribution to schools was *On the Way to School*. However, three additional titles were left behind by the trainer at the headquarters: *A Surprising Fish Tale*, *The Blanket,* and *The Principal's New Car*.

The objective of the pack, according to READ, is "to stimulate pupils to tell or write stories based on a sequence of story posters." The posters have no text and can therefore be employed with flexibility, at various grade levels and in any language. The picture stories were, therefore, a significant addition to RAN's usual VRP activities, which focus on reading for leisure without the usual pressure and stress of school.

The Vacation Reading Village

The Vacation Reading Programme was conducted in the primary school setting. RAN's contact with the school was established some years earlier, when it organized a number of training workshops for teachers in the school to strengthen their literacy skills as professionals and assist them in the area of literacy skill development among their pupils. The organizers were allowed the use of one block of four classrooms as well as the school's playground. This was a departure from the arrangement in previous years when RAN used the facilities and grounds of the State Library Complex. The change was made to accommodate the yearly increase in attendance and to give the participants greater freedom to express their exuberance and execute their activities without constituting a public nuisance. This is why it was called a Vacation Reading Village (VRV).

For the activities, only two groups were considered necessary at this stage. Students of primary classes 4–6 formed one group, and those of secondary classes 1–3 formed the other. The arrangement was intended to encourage interaction across age, school, class, and gender boundaries and ensure that participants learned from one another as well as from the organizers—and that organizers learned from participants. Throughout the period, however, opportunities were provided for

the two groups to meet together during special sessions.

The sections that follow report on how 103 children in upper primary school (classes 4–6, ages 7–9 years) and junior secondary school (classes 1–3, ages 10–13 years) were exposed to the READ Picture Story packs at the 2000 VRV, a one-month program of the RAN held in Calabar, Nigeria. The account shows what the children accomplished during the three weeks of the program. There are also implications of our observations and products for the overall development and promotion of literacy in Nigeria and possibly elsewhere.

Providing a literacy-rich environment in the VRV

Children were involved in a number of activities geared toward preparing their minds for book production. To enhance the literacy environment, a library was set up from which children could borrow books, newspapers, and magazines of their choice for not more than a week at a time. In addition, a billboard was provided for posting any news items participants wished to report to the village. Some of the other activities that helped to prepare participants for the book-writing project are described here.

Book display with meet-the-author. Teale and Yokota (2000) described this activity as *author's chair*. Participants in the 1991 and 1995 Vacation Reading Programme (Ekpe & Etuk, 1999) who had written stories and poems were invited back to the village to read their works, which had been edited, printed, and published by RAN.

The authors were decorated with garlands, and their works were celebrated. Sitting on a small chair and surrounded by participants, Jane read *Nta Leaves Ubaha* in its new, rewritten and illustrated form. Seno, Utibe, and Unwana each read haiku poems, to the rapt attention and admiration of all. The audience asked questions relating to how easy or difficult the authors found writing to be; how they got their inspiration; what they knew about the origin, form, and subject matter of haiku poems; and how the audience members too could construct poems.

Reading the world. These activities proceeded along two pathways. In the first, participants walked around the Vacation Reading Village, taking the time to consciously experience the world through their senses, and then returned to share with the group, through discussion and writing, the sounds heard, sights seen, smells perceived, sensations felt, and, where applicable, flavors tasted. The exercise was intended to stimulate a multisensory response to literacy. In the second activity, children searched through piles of newspapers to select, write down, and share news items they found interesting. These items were placed on the special VRV bulletin board under the headings of *Something New; Something Different; Something Special; Something Cool,* along with the name of the contributor of the news item.

Seriously speaking. Provision was made for participants to practice their oral composition skills by holding discussions during group activities and by making formal speeches to the whole village. For the speech, children selected *what-I-think-about* topics by ballot and then spoke on them for three minutes, while everyone listened and applauded. Topics included music, money, grown-ups, friendship, school, fashion, fame, and opinions about Nigeria's President Olusegun Obasanjo.

Word games and sentence games. Participants played games using synonyms, homophones, and literal/literary meanings, among others. The activity of making sentences using scrambled words was quite popular among the children. It consisted of three stages. First, a word bank was created from participants' own vocabulary generated from another activity. Second, students worked together in groups to produce as many as possible new, correct sentences within a specified time as announced by a moderator. Third, each group's secretary read the sentences to the whole group.

Story elements. Participants were taught to appreciate style, plot, character, point of view, and setting as story elements, along the same lines presented by Buss and Karnowski (2000), but with less detail and minimal technicality, considering their ability levels.

Writing the storybooks

The procedure for writing the storybooks began with the READ Picture Story lesson, using the recommended five-step format given in the Teacher's Guide by the de-

signers of the material. We present the steps here along with our observations of the participants' response at each step.

1. Introduce the pack.

This step consists of holding up the pack for the children to see, telling them what it is called, announcing the story title, and briefly explaining what the activity is about—reading pictures.

2. Display the posters one at a time.

Using the questions on the flip side as a guide, direct the discussion to ensure pupil enjoyment and participation. The interaction at this stage of the Picture Story presentation is always highly participatory. Children are eager to provide answers to questions, offer their opinions, and hazard some guesses. From our experience, several characteristics of the READ Picture Stories make this degree of enthusiastic response possible:

First, the story posters are full of visual interest. They are large (51 cm x 36 cm), clear, and colorful.

Second, the organizers ensure that they maintain an overall friendly disposition, supported by a pleasant facial expression and tone of voice, throughout the duration of the activity.

Third, the themes are highly generative and sometimes entertaining, involving ideas with which the participants could easily connect—wearing a uniform, going to school, playing with a stick, catching fish, or being frightened by a large animal.

Fourth, the questions are planned to elicit thought-provoking responses, whether factual or creative, requiring children to stretch their imaginations and draw from their background experiences, as well as to make, adjust, and readjust their predictions. For example, Poster 1 of *A Surprising Fish Tale* has as the first question "Choose a name for the boy." A question of this nature engenders a sense of power and ownership in children and requires them to use their cultural background experience. This question often produces *Okon* as their choice for a name—Okon is a common name for males in the language of the area. Other questions follow, such as "Can the boy see the monkey?" (Poster 2), "How does the baboon feel?" (Poster 7), and "What is the mother bird going to do?" (Poster 8).

In addition to prodding children to draw on their background knowledge, the teacher also invites them to guess, predict, and then check their predictions when the next poster is presented. An alternative to the Poster 8 question above, which is also a favorite with facilitators, is "What do you think will happen next?" With younger children we find it useful to ask the question "What do you see?" when a new poster is presented. It hardly ever fails to leads children effectively into discussion about a poster.

"Is the fish going to get out of the nest?", presented as the final question of the last poster, invites children to construct their own ending for the story. Every response is acknowledged, and none is rejected. Instead of responding "No, that's wrong" (which we avoid doing), the teacher could ask, "Why do you think that is so?"

Whatever the response, it is accepted—tentatively, if it is inaccurate. In the Picture Story *On the Way to School,* for example, a number of children, having never known of an animal larger than an elephant, and having never heard the word *rhinoceros*, often confidently identify the animal as an elephant. Rather than correct them immediately, the facilitator allows the children to discover the correct name later on in the lesson. In *A Surprising Fish Tale* the baboon often comes off as a dog to the children. The facilitator may respond, "It does look like a dog in this picture, doesn't it? Well, let's wait and see. Perhaps we'll find out as the story goes on." The discovery injects some excitement, strengthens the children's learning, and adds to their background experience.

3. Write the story as a shared writing activity.

Write one sentence (or more) per poster/page on the chalkboard or on a large sheet of paper to be illustrated by pupils working in groups and collated into a Big Book for the class library or for children in the lower grades.

4. Read the story together as a shared reading activity.

The connections here between speaking and writing, and between writing and reading, continue to be strengthened in the children's experience, as they work with the facilitator/teacher to convert their oral contributions into written text in the

shared writing activity. They return again to speaking and reading in the shared reading of the books as they prepare for the independent writing task in the next step. In this procedure, each stage reinforces the preceding stage before leading into the next.

5. Let the pupils write individual stories.

Use the poster in the classroom session, and the Little Books at home, as guides for sequence and pagination of individual Little Books. Participants can choose to use different story titles at this stage of their writing. They also can be encouraged to continue the story, because the READ Picture Stories are designed to end inconclusively; a number of participants did this.

At the individual book-writing stage of the Picture Story lesson, children were encouraged to choose their own perspective, think of their own titles, illustrate their stories, number the pages of their books, and indicate the name of the author, all in continual effort to encourage creativity and ownership of literacy.

The participants worked together with the organizers in folding and cutting up large sheets of bond paper for the book pages and cardboard for the covers. Although care was taken to ensure that children did not work under pressure, all the books had to be submitted before the closing of that year's VRV so as to prepare the finished products for display to parents.

Pupils in the junior primary section produced their own stories based on *On the Way to School*. Those in the senior primary group used *The Principal's New Car*, while those in the junior secondary section used *A Surprising Fish Tale*. We restrict the present discussion to the productions of the last group—junior secondary students, 10 to 13 years of age.

Findings and discussion

The children's writing using the title *A Surprising Fish Tale* revealed an array of creative features, which are presented unedited here. Consideration of them in this report is positive, and therefore we will not focus on the children's errors.

While many stories were completed with illustrations, some children had finished only the text and were struggling with illustrations at the time of submission. The story titles were creative and reflected four out of the five possible perspectives in the story. Those from the boy's perspective included *Ita and the Fishermonkey* and *The Unfortunate Fisherman*. *A Lucky Day for Mother Bird* and *The Lucky Kingfisher* featured the bird's perspective, while *The Fishermonkey's Adventures* was told from the monkey's view. Stories told from the perspective of the fish included *The Miracle Fish* and *The Journey of the Stolen Fish*.

Word formation. Participants coined words to convey meanings as they perceived them (e.g., *fishermonkey, fisherboy*).

Dialogue. Even the birds and baboons could speak in the children's stories. Utibe's story contains the line, "Monkey, please give me back my fish." Seno's baboon says, "Yes! Yes! My luck! I will eat this fish alone!" Baby birds exclaim, "What! Stranger! I pray Mother Bird comes back soon! Mom!" and "Something is in our house!"

Cross-curricular possibilities. Aspects of the story touched upon generative issues, which an attentive teacher could use as a take-off point for connections, group discussion, research, and action.

Planning/budgeting. Emem gives her character, Ita, the line, "Today I am going for fishing and I will get some fishes, eat some and sell some so that I will have money," while Seno's story says, "…so Mum could make a good meal and I could sell some of the fishes and get money."

Prayer, making requests, motives, right and wrong, exploitation, honesty, trust, stealing. In Emem's story the monkey prays, "Oh God help this boy to catch some fishes so that I will benefit from it." Also, in Utibe's story she comments, "A monkey is very *trickish*."

Doing chores, responsibility, helpfulness, initiative. When Madara's character, Ita, returns from school, she reports, "There was no food in the house so he said to his self let me for fishing today so when I come back I will come and cook for my parents."

Song. A number of children wrote songs for the boy character to sing as he settled down to his fishing business:

Edu wrote, "I am go for fishing
I like fishing
To have some money."

Utibe wrote, "Fish, Fish, for money." Odenke's song was the most elaborate, and is represented in her illustration as musical notes floating from Eyo's mouth. The first page of the story (illustration and

text) is reproduced in Figure 1, showing the first stanza. Odenke also wrote a second stanza:

> "I knew am going to catch a fish
> O-la! O-la!
> Mmh mmh mmmh
> O-la! O-la!"

Local color. All the children wrote in English, but in addition they attempted to indigenize their stories, not only by character names such as *Ita* and *Eyo* but also by injecting "Nigerianisms" into the language. For example, "I want to have my own share too *oh*!" appears in Seno's story, and "*Woi*! I caught a big fish" in Ann's story. The italicized interjections are basically Nigerian.

Book skills (illustration and page planning). Most of the stories were well illustrated, with one picture per page of text written by the children beneath an illustration. Other children placed their illustrations on the right page and the text on the left page.

Beginning the story. Here, again, some creativity was observed. Not all authors chose to use the formulaic "Once upon a time" to start their narratives. Also, writers tried to weave in a reason for the boy's apparent absence from school and his presence at the stream. Their stories displayed different levels of creativity, imagination, and control of the language, as illustrated here:

Anthonia: "Once upon a time there was an African boy and his name was Patric but people called him Pat. Pat preferred fishing to going to school."

Utibe: "One day Ita went fishing."

Ini: "One bright afternoon after school Ita quickly rushed to the stream to fish."

Akong: "This is a boy called Okon. He is a fisherboy he going to fish in the stream we is [with his] uniform."

Ann: "This is Eric his [he is] happy going fishing his [he is] saying I will catch a fish and sell to customers."

Akeye: "On a hot Saturday afternoon a boy whose name was Paul sat at home feeling idle. Suddenly a thought came to his mind that he should go fishing."

Ending the story. Most of the stories ended with the fish being eaten by the birds, which is where Poster 8 appears to end the story. But the READ Picture

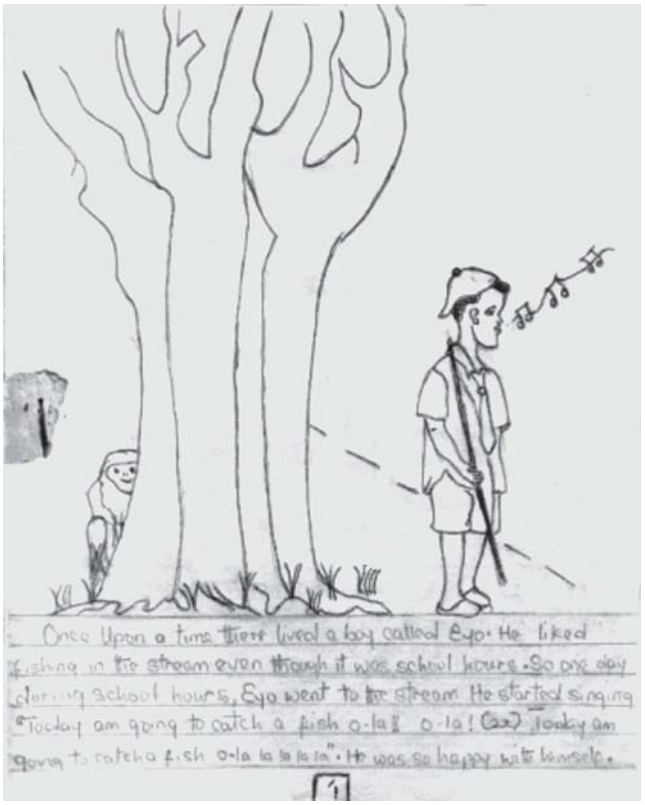

Figure 1. First page of Odenke's story

Stories are designed to be open ended so that children can give any endings they like. Of the two children who added something more, Anthony decided that from that day on, the birds had ample supplies of food and were very happy, while Emem's fish transformed into a bird: "But when she looked very well she saw that it was a bird and she was only with one worm to feed her babies she went back to get two more."

One impressive submission was made by Unwana. She named the main character Rivaldo, possibly an onomatopoeic attempt to link him with his river-faring ways. In Unwana's story, all the characters have names. This gives them more life and personality, and makes it possible for the author to manipulate them without unnecessary repetition. The first page of her story is presented in her own writing in Figure 2.

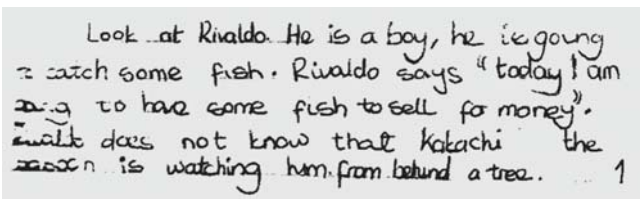
Look at Rivaldo. He is a boy, he is going
to catch some fish. Rivaldo says "today I am
going to have some fish to sell for money".
Rivaldo does not know that Kakachi the
[illegible] is watching him from behind a tree. 1

Figure 2. First page of Unwana's story

Figure 3. Idorenyin's illustration

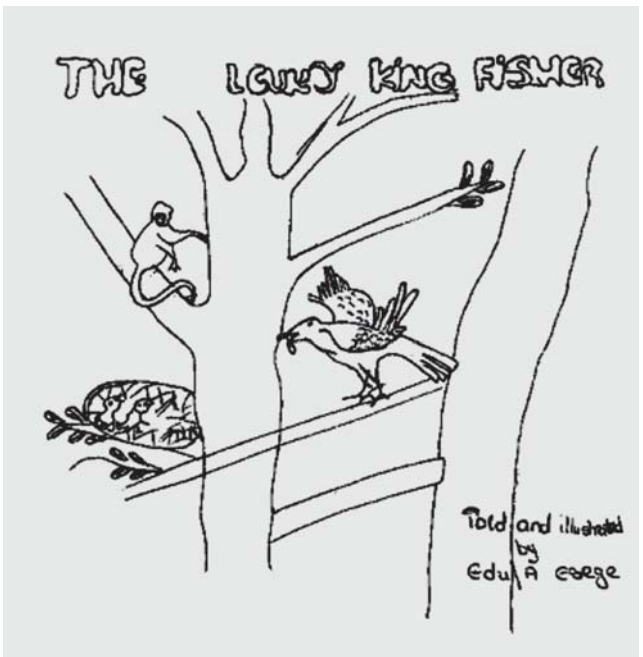

Figure 4. Edu's illustration

Presented in Figure 3 is one of eight excellent illustrations Idorenyin used to complement his narrative. All the illustrations are full of movement, expression, and meaning. Edu has elaborately illustrated the cover of her book as well, as shown in Figure 4. With some editing, a combination of Unwana's story with Idorenyin's illustrations and Edu's cover page could easily produce one good-quality storybook for use in the lower grades.

In order for all those committed to the development of literacy to make meaningful progress in the literacy-learning classroom, certain aspects of the communicative approach (Garvie, 1990) must be adopted as a matter of urgency:

- By focusing on the message rather than on the medium, the "fluency and communication engendered" (Garvie, 1990, p. 4) are emphasized above accuracy of expression, and error is viewed positively as an indicator of stage of learning.
- By being encouraged to learn by doing, children not only learn more quickly but also take responsibility for their own actions, including their mistakes.
- Emphasizing the process rather than the product requires the teacher to be ready to see the end product as less important than the value of learning in transit.
- Adopting a facilitative/catalytic role rather than a purely instructional one prepares the teacher to be ready sometimes to "discard" the lesson plan and "enter into conversation with the pupils using the moment…while… linking all this with the overall aim…of the curriculum" (Garvie, p. 5).
- Using what the student brings into the literacy learning experience not only enriches the whole community but also helps to reduce stress, foster belonging, and enhance self-worth within the learning environment.

By their versatile nature, picture stories enable the teacher to achieve all of these advantages in the classroom setting

Conclusion

To strengthen writing skills, Lapp, Flood, and Roser (2000) suggest that more opportunities for reading be provided at home and at school for pupils; that writing be made a daily, collaborative, purposeful act; that expressive language be encouraged through book conversation; that listening be active and purposeful during sharing times; and that opportunities be provided for children to comprehend, interpret, and represent their understandings. These are views with which we strongly agree, having been a part of a community of budding writers who continually inspire us with their creativity and surprise us with their insight, zeal, and commitment (despite and perhaps because of their playfulness).

The brief survey of children's writing undertaken here has revealed that children can and do work independently and collaboratively to produce books to share with their peers and to usefully and seriously engage younger children. By

writing the story themselves, the participants have gained insight on literary components and experienced the processes involved: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing (Buss & Karnowski, 2000).

The participants in the story-writing exercise have, among other things, developed confidence and ability in working independently, had a chance to use the holiday constructively in an environment removed from the pressures of regular school, experienced the satisfaction of completing an enjoyable task, and manipulated the patterns of language to express meaning in their own words, using English.

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Zhang Yunfeng

Task type and teacher's role:
Two important factors in effective group learning

For decades Chinese teachers have been quite used to the traditional way of teaching English, in which the teacher is regarded as the authority who dominates the whole class. He or she explains the text in a traditional grammar-translation format, trying to put everything into students' minds while paying little attention to their feelings and reactions. As a result, Chinese students may do well on the English tests that are concerned with reading skills, such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language and Graduate Record Exam. But in other tests that focus more on speaking skills—such as the Test of Spoken English, the International English Language Testing System, and the Business English Certificate—they are found to be much less proficient (Cao Ling, 1999). Meanwhile, many university graduates, who have already studied English for more than 10 years, have to attend special speaking, listening, and writing courses to improve their ability to use the language. These factors have caught the attention of those involved with English teaching in China, as they have begun to realize the weak points of the traditional way of language teaching.

Nowadays, many linguists and English teachers in China are turning to the communicative approach. Articles promoting a reform of language teaching have appeared in various journals, and some textbooks based on a more communicative syllabus have been written. The student-centered approach, which aims at improving learners' communicative competence, has been adopted by some language teachers. Group work, one of the most important class activities for developing students' communicative ability, is gradually being adopted for use in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms.

Group work boasts a number of advantages, as Gower (1987) has noted: It stimulates the learners' experience of various types of interaction, and helps to generate a more relaxed and cooperative classroom atmosphere. Students are more likely to feel free of the pressure of being listened to by the teacher and so are more ready to speak. In practice, however, there are some problems with group work. In my class I find that it is somewhat difficult to get everybody involved actively in the group work, and the use of the mother tongue is very common. In order to see how task types and teacher's roles affect students' performance in group work, I designed three experiments to try to answer the following two questions:

1. Which task type, optional information exchange or required information exchange, is more effective?
   An optional information-exchange (OIR) task (also called a one-way task) is one in which one or several participants possess all the information and the others have to get this information. Required information exchange (RIE) (also called a two-way task) is defined as a task that requires the exchange of information among all participants, each of whom possesses some piece of information not known by, but needed by, all other participants to solve the problem (Long & Porter, 1985).
2. To what extent do teachers' skills in organizing group work affect students' performance?
   The intention of this article is to give some suggestions obtained through the

experiments to make group work participation more balanced and to reduce the use of the mother tongue. Although mine is an EFL class, the outcome of my research may be useful for any teacher practicing group work.

Experiments in group work practice

The subjects in the present study were 30 first-year non—English-major students in Xi'an Institute of Posts and Telecommunications. Eight of the students were female, 22 were male. The English textbook we used—*New College English* (Ying Huilan, 2000)— was written under the guidance of the student-centered subject teaching model. Although the students had studied English for six years in secondary school, they had only learned vocabulary and grammar and had had little chance to speak. The students were divided into seven groups of four at random (the two extra students worked in a dyad). Three tasks were chosen from *New College English* for the study. All recordings of data were made during the three scheduled lessons. On each of the data-gathering occasions the students were asked to do one task, which was presented as part of the normal class routine.

The tasks were as follows:

Task 1: Describing the pictures

There were four pictures printed in the textbook. Each member of the group was asked to describe one of the four pictures that the other students could not see. The four pictures together made a well-organized story, but the story could be comprehensible only if each description was clear. The students did this task at the same time and in the same classroom. Task 1 could be done only if the students shared information. This was a required information-exchange task.

Task 2: Case study

The students were asked to work in groups to respond to the following case: You are young parents. You have a beautiful 8-year-old daughter. Like all parents you want your child to be happy and healthy. You want to give her all the love and support you can. What are the most important things you would do to ensure her physical, intellectual, and emotional health? Different groups did Task 2 simultaneously. Obviously, there was no obligation to exchange information in this task. It was an optional information-exchange task.

Task 3: Free discussion

After listening to an interview about people's attitude toward 10 professions, the students were asked to discuss the following questions in groups:

1. What is your impression of these professions?
2. Do you have any prejudices against these professions? If so, what are your prejudices?
3. What factors will influence you in choosing a job?

There was no obligation to exchange information in this task. It was also an optional information—exchange task. The first two groups did this task with only the task directions and little help from the teacher. For the second two groups, the teacher intervened, gave clear instructions, and appointed group leaders during the process of discussion.

The measure used in this study is the AS-unit—the Analysis of Speech Unit. It is described by Foster, Tonkyn, and Wigglesworth (2000) like this: An AS-unit is a single speaker's utterance consisting of an independent clause, or sub-clausal unit, or together with any subordinate clause(s) associated with either. A sub-clausal unit refers to one or more phrases that have meaning from the context of the discourse or situation. For example, "yes," "no," "thank you," "I understand," and "oh, poor man" are counted as AS-units.

Results and analysis of the first two experiments

The first two tasks were done within four minutes each. Three groups were chosen, at random, to be recorded. The results are shown in the tables.

From Table 1 we see that the three groups produced the same result: The required information-exchange task resulted in more AS-units than the optional information-exchange task.

Table 1 Number of AS-units produced by Groups A, B, and C

Group	Language production (AS-units)	
	Task 1 (RIE)	Task 2 (OIE)
A	22	16
B	24	13
C	25	14

Table 2 shows that in Task 1 the individuals in each group shared the interaction fairly. There was no big gap among them in language production. In Task 2, however, the distribution of language production is not balanced. It is obviously much more difficult for a student to remain silent in a required information-exchange task. Even S_6 in Group B, who said nothing in the optional information-exchange task, produced a quarter of the AS-units in the required information-exchange task.

Table 2 Number of AS-units produced by each student in Groups A, B, and C

Group	Task 1 (RIE)	Task 2 (OIE)
A	S_1 S_2 S_3 S_4 5 6 5 6	S_1 S_2 S_3 S_4 5 6 3 2
B	S_5 S_6 S_7 S_8 6 6 5 7	S_5 S_6 S_7 S_8 4 0 4 5
C	S_9 S_{10} S_{11} S_{12} 7 5 5 8	S_9 S_{10} S_{11} S_{12} 4 4 2 4

Notes. S_1 = Student 1, S_2 = Student 2, and so forth.

From the numbers of language-production AS-units by each group and by the individuals in each group, we may come to some conclusions: First, the RIE task brings more AS-units than the OIE task; second, the RIE task results in more balanced language production than the OIE task.

Results and analysis of the third experiment

There was no restricted time limit for Task 3. The students were asked to inform the teacher when they finished the discussion. Groups D and E and Groups F and G did the task separately. The teacher gave the first two groups very simple instructions, read aloud the three questions, asked the students to discuss them, and stood by when the discussion was under way. For the last two groups, the teacher asked the students to brainstorm the words that came into their minds when they were told what they were going to discuss. A group leader was appointed to host the discussion, making sure that everybody in the group spoke and that English was the only language used. Once the discussion was under way, the teacher kept her distance, at first. After approximately half of the discussion time had elapsed, she went around the classroom, listening to discussions, giving suggestions, and encouraging the less able or shyer students to speak. The results are shown in Table 3 and Table 4.

Table 3 Number of AS-units produced by Groups D, E, F, and G

Group	Language production (AS-units)
D	25
E	20
F	60
G	69

Table 4 Number of AS-units produced by each student in Groups D, E, F, and G

Group	Language production (AS-units)
D	S_{13} S_{14} S_{15} S_{16} 5 3 13 4
E	S_{17} S_{18} S_{19} S_{20} 10 6 2 2
F	S_{21} S_{22} S_{23} S_{24} 18 14 19 9
G	S_{25} S_{26} S_{27} S_{28} 19 18 18 14

The results of language production indicate that the teacher's skills in organizing group work are of vital importance. Effective instruction will make students speak more and create a more balanced performance.

Conversational modification (including comprehension checks, confirmation checks, and clarification requests) plays an important role in making input comprehensible, and thereby promotes second-language acquisition. A structured interview was carried out during break time among the students in the study about the effects of the teacher's presence when discussion is underway. Among 30 students, 14 said the absence or presence of the teacher would not affect their conversation, while 16 students said the teacher's absence would make them feel

free to talk and the teacher's presence would make them feel embarrassed. Nobody said the teacher's presence would make him or her produce more modifications, so I assumed that the presence or absence of the teacher would not influence the amount of modified interaction in group work. Table 5 presents each student's modification in Task 3.

Table 5 Number of modifications produced by each student in Task 3

Group	Language production (AS-units)
D	S_{13} S_{14} S_{15} S_{16} 1 0 0 1
E	S_{17} S_{18} S_{19} S_{20} 2 0 0 0
F	S_{21} S_{22} S_{23} S_{24} 2 1 2 2
G	S_{25} S_{26} S_{27} S_{28} 2 5 4 2

From Table 5 we notice that as far as modification was concerned, there was a great difference among the individual students. The most notable feature is that the modification numbers for Groups D and E were 5 zeros. It seems that the students in these two groups were speaking on their own when doing this task, not talking with one another. When asked why there was little modified interaction, the students said that they felt embarrassed to indicate their lack of comprehension in front of their teacher, so they were reluctant to ask their interlocutors even when they did not understand others' words. This suggests that once the group discussion is under way, it is advisable for the teacher to keep his or her distance for a while, as some students may feel inhibited in front of the teacher.

From these three experiments, we can observe some problems with group work. First, student participation in group work is unbalanced. Second, there are few modified interactions among the students. The main reasons are as follows: First, Chinese students are often shy. They are used to "listening carefully," as it is a Chinese tradition to listen more and speak less (we have been taught that's why we have two ears and only one mouth). Second, some students think that if they ask questions it shows that their English is not as good as that of their classmates. They would, thus, rather keep silent than "lose face," especially in front of their teacher. Third, a few students regard "interrupting the conversation by asking questions" as an impolite behavior.

Suggestions obtained through the experiments

I am going to offer some suggestions on both group work design of EFL textbooks and group work organization by the teacher.

Suggestions on group work design of EFL textbooks

Two popular EFL textbooks in China, Book I of *College English (Revised Edition)* (Dong Yafen, 1997) and *New College English* (Ying Huilan, 2000), are taken as examples. Results from rating the activities in the two popular EFL textbooks are given in Table 6.

Table 6 Number of activities in the two textbooks

	College English (10 units)	New College English (12 units)
Number of activities	188	328
Number of group activities	13	123
Number of RIE tasks	3	20

Table 6 shows that in *New College English* there are only 20 required information-exchange tasks among 123 group activities. This amounts to only 16% of the total group activities. Although the percentage of optional information-exchange tasks in *College English* (23%) is higher than that in *New College English,* in terms of absolute number it is still low.

Here I suggest that the structure of group work in the teaching materials be changed. The number of RIE tasks can be increased so as to make the students, especially weaker students, speak more, because only when each member of the group contributes can the task be accomplished. These kinds of activities include role-play (each student plays a role), picture describing (each has a picture to describe to form a story), and asking questions.

On the other hand, a few group activities appear to have been created merely

by adding the words "in groups" in to the descriptions of what were formerly individual tasks. For example, in *New College English* reading-centered activities, there are group work directions like this: "Work in groups for the text structure and complete the outline with what you get from the passage." When doing this kind of exercise, students usually ignore the instructions and would rather do it alone. This kind of group work needs clearer direction to encourage students to cooperate with one another. Some of the tasks can be changed into individual work; for most, more specific instruction and more guidance should be given to encourage students to interact effectively.

The English textbooks mentioned here are only examples. I often hear complaints from my colleagues that their Chinese textbooks, their history textbooks, and so on have the same problems: There are not enough group activities, and the instructions for group work are not clear. "Do it in groups" does not necessarily make something into group work. Unfortunately, this is very common and appears in all kinds of textbooks.

Suggestions on group work organization

From these experiments we see that although group work is a student-centered activity, a teacher plays a very important role in it. The teacher's competence with regard to group work affects students' performance greatly

The results of the third experiment suggest that the teacher's clear instructions will bring more language production and more modified interaction. At the same time, the teacher's absence will result in more modified interaction, too. The following are some suggestions for teachers in group work organization.

1. Clear instruction of the task

Clear instruction is of great importance to the success of group work. Before group work begins, the teacher's task is to make all the students know the requirements of the task and help them get ready for it. Some warm-up exercises may be useful. For example, the teacher can give students hints to help them think over the topic from different points of view; she or he can provide the students, or ask them to brainstorm, some relevant words, phrases, and sentence patterns; or the teacher can read one or two short passages on related topics so as to help them generate their own ideas.

2. Specification of each student's role

If the group work is about discussion, each group can have a group leader, a secretary, and a reporter (students can interchange the roles). The group leader hosts the discussion and works as a monitor, making sure that everybody in the group speaks and that English is the only language used during the activity. The secretary takes notes of what each person has said and, on the basis of these notes, develops an outline (alone or with the reporter). The reporter is responsible for the presentation to the whole class later on. The other members contribute their ideas to the group. In this way, every member of the group has some responsibility, and each student has a specific role. So, no matter at what level the students are, they have to speak and take an active part in group work.

Although none of the students spoke Chinese during the experimental group work because they knew they were being recorded, the use of the mother tongue remained a problem. The group leader's role as monitor is very important in reducing or eliminating the use of the mother tongue, no matter whether the group activity is discussion, role-playing, storytelling, or other forms of group work.

3. Teacher's role when group work is under way

According to Harmer (1997) the teacher can act as controller, assessor, organizer, prompter, participant, resource, tutor, and/or investigator in the group work. Some useful *don'ts* for the teacher's role in group work were given by Brown (1991): Do not sit at your desk and grade papers, do not leave the room and take a break, do not spend an undue amount of time with one group at the expense of others, do not correct students' errors unless asked to do so, and do not assume a dominating or disruptive role while monitoring groups. Bligh, Ebrahim, Jacques, and Warrenpiper (1975) suggested the following prohibitions: Don't correct or reject the first contributions—even if they are wildly wrong, don't state an opinion rigidly—as this may inhibit students; and don't answer questions that could be answered by other members of the class.

From the results of the experiments, I suggest two more *don'ts*: Do not go around the classroom and do not stay with the students at the beginning of the group work. Once the group work is under way, it is advisable for the teacher to keep his or her distance for a while, as some students may feel inhibited in front of the teacher. But during the last few minutes of the group work, it may be a good idea for the teacher to circulate to see how things are going with each group, give suggestions and encouragement, and answer questions.

Conclusion

This article investigates the effects of two group work task types and explores the teacher's role in a real classroom setting. Although the study has been carried out in the Chinese context, I think the suggestions I put forward are of some value in other cultural settings and other subject areas. No matter what the cultural and educational environment, there are students who fail to participate in group work efficiently. They may be shy, may be poor at the subject, or may come from a different cultural setting. If the teacher chooses required information-exchange tasks and uses skills in organizing group work, these students will be "forced" to speak, the result will thus be effective group work.

Of course, this is simply a preliminary study about group work, and it has some limitations. Only 30 students participated in the study and the experiments were done within only three scheduled lessons, but I hope it will be helpful for EFL teaching in different cultural settings as well as for other subject areas.

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Connecting with students who are disinterested and inexperienced

William G. Brozo

Throughout my time as editor of this department I have been an unwavering advocate for strategies and practices that build upon what students already read, know, and like to do outside of school, linking those interests to classroom topics and texts. While my conviction remains as strong as ever, that students will become engaged readers and learners when those links are made, I feel compelled to respond to a growing number of teachers' concerns related to my admonitions to tie students' interests and competencies to school learning. Put simply, here is what teachers are asking me: How can we connect with students' interests in reading and other subject areas when they tell us they don't read anything and aren't interested in anything? How, indeed? I'll offer an answer by way of an extended anecdote about my encounter with Omar (all names in this article are pseudonyms), a young man I tutored in a university reading center I directed.

When I asked Omar, an 11-year-old fifth grader, about the kinds of reading and literacy activities in which he engages outside of school, this is what he said:

> We don't have books and stuff like that at my house. And we don't have a computer either…. I don't have computer games or anything like that.

"And what do you enjoy doing for fun?" I pressed. He shrugged his shoulders and replied, "I don't know…nothing much…. I watch a lot of TV."

Omar's responses illustrate a serious issue confronting teachers today. Growing numbers of youth are entering our schools and classrooms extremely limited in terms of their traditional print experiences. Not only do these students come from homes where print materials are few and far between, but also they seem unaware of or unable to express what interests them. How do teachers build upon students' seemingly nonexistent everyday literacies and competencies? Without expressed interests, without home-based experience with print, what resources do Omar and others like him bring to school that can be honored and linked to classroom disciplines and topics?

Help students discover and develop interests

When students claim they aren't interested in anything, we must help them discover what actually does interest them. In spite of Omar's lack of enthusiasm for anything except watching TV, I knew I could help him find other activities he would enjoy. After just a couple of weeks of exposure to many different topics and texts, Omar began exhibiting an interest in magic books. It was a humble place to start, but these texts gave us a toehold from which to take bolder steps toward more challenging material. Omar liked these books because he found he could do his own magic by following the directions. Within a few months, he was reading more sophisticated texts and performing increasingly complex tricks. In addition, he was writing a book of magic composed of descriptions of his favorite tricks accompanied by his own illustrations and the digital photographs we took.

Armed with these insights about Omar, I urged his teacher to find ways of connecting his newfound interest in magic with class topics. It seemed a stretch at first, but before long the connections were being made. For example, in mathematics, Omar was assigned to explain how Newton's first law of inertia applied to one of his tricks that involved a small ball, a plastic cup of water, and a straw.

Take advantage of the life experiences of mentors from the community

Another way to help youth expand their repertoire of interests is by arranging systematic opportunities for them to interact with community members who are engaged citizens and have a wide variety of life experiences (Sturtevant et al., in press). With this goal in mind, we teamed Omar with Raj, a graduate student and computer graphics engineer, for weekly conversation and technology-related activities. Raj taught Omar how to use a digital camera and edit photos. He talked extensively about and demonstrated his graphics skills for Omar. Raj even made a digitized 3-D simulation of Omar performing a card trick.

Omar received permission from his teacher to invite Raj to his fifth-grade classroom as a guest speaker on the topic of careers in the computer graphics industry. Omar proudly introduced his mentor to his fellow students and beamed with pride when Raj projected the card trick simulation for all to see as an example of particular digital graphics techniques. In another

gesture honoring Omar's newly developed outside-of-school competencies, his teacher allowed him to use computer graphics for an assignment related to the rock cycle.

Build commitment through cross-age tutoring

A teacher friend of mine who is also an author of young adult novels once told me, "If we want our students to be interested, we have to be interesting." So Omar was given the opportunity to become both interested and interesting: Omar's tutorial plan now included a cross-age tutoring component (Fisher, 2001) that paired him with a first grader also receiving tutorial services in our center. Each week for 15 minutes or so, Omar was responsible for helping 7-year-old Abel with reading. With guidance from Abel's tutor and me, Omar learned how to uncover the younger boy's interests and experiences and then locate appropriate print material to match. As the weeks progressed we witnessed in Omar a heightened sense of responsibility—he wanted to make sure that the time he spent reading with Abel was enjoyable. His "big brother" attitude motivated him to learn more about what the two of them were reading, so he could be knowledgeable on the topics that were of interest to Abel. Similar benefits have been observed in other cross-age tutoring contexts (Brozo & Hargis, 2003).

A final word

Youth who have interests are engaged; and engaged thinkers are better students (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). For students who come to us having no expressed interests and few, if any, outside-of-school print encounters, we need to employ creative strategies for enriching their experiences and broadening their understandings of the world of reading. These strategies should help foster a disposition of curiosity, as they did for Omar, and endow students with the intellectual and experiential resources needed to make critical connections to classroom topics and texts.

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Literacy Award

The International Reading Association Literacy Award, which carries a US$15,000 prize, is presented each September by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as part of the world celebration of International Literacy Day.

The 2004 International Reading Association Literacy Award was given to L'Edikasyon pu travayer (LPT), a nongovernmental organization in Mauritius. LPT's adult literacy program focuses on women and emphasizes cultural context and use of mother languages. LPT produced, printed, and distributed books, including the first Mauritian Creole dictionary, and other reading materials covering every aspect of learners' lives.

In sponsoring the International Reading Association Literacy Award since 1979, the Association seeks to recognize meritorious contributions to the struggle against illiteracy. Through their projects, recipients of the award have aided millions of people around the world in improving their literacy skills.

[Source: UNESCO and *Reading Today*]

For information about the history of the award and its sponsorship by the International Reading Association, e-mail pubinfo@reading.org.

The computer at school: Missed opportunities?

Rafael Madoyan

The theme of computer use and misuse in schools is important for many countries, including those in my own region, the Caucasus.

It's not that we need to convince colleagues that technical progress is here to stay. Few underestimate the role of information and communication technologies, which have been declared educational priorities. But somehow we are slow getting them into our schools and thus miss the most effective learning years. Ten to 15 years ago we believed that, with our intellectual potential and traditions in this area, we would quickly become a global leader in technological education. Today we are realizing we did not even remain on the starting line but rather moved backwards—all because we approached computer technologies for education in the wrong way.

To put it even more succinctly, when we should have been embracing computers to foster enthusiastic student-directed learning, we've been using them instead for the most limited and traditional purposes—from teaching students how to join a Web forum to "renting out" equipment to our communities.

In my country, all this was clear at the Second Congress of the Armenian branch of Project Harmony, which was established in 2000 to implement two technology grants from the U.S. State Department. The scope of this congress in Yerevan and the zeal of the speakers were hardly evidence of our success; they testified only to the importance attached to technology development in the United States and to the scope of U.S. investment in our education. There have been few practical results from this investment. All substantive talks at the congress could have been headed simply "Announcements of Programs Offered by International Organizations." Not a single school principal or teacher of computer science provided any serious analysis or suggestions; they just reiterated the importance of technology. I heard only one example of serious computer use for education: CD courses in physics and chemistry, which reportedly are used by teachers in one school. I left the congress wondering why huge investments in our national systems of education have such low efficiency. Why are imaginative and educationally sound uses of technology so often resented and rejected by schools?

Technology in schools

Schools usually enter the world of information technology by buying computers, putting them in a special classroom, and perhaps connecting to the Internet. The schools then become hostages of these classrooms. Administrators, having obtained the expensive equipment, need to see it being used, and real education of students and teachers in computer science is not always their top priority, in my observation. Typically, a school organizes courses for computer operators and users of Word, Excel, and the Internet, enrolling both students and community members. It imposes its own idea of Internet use on students, who are quickly bored by limited approaches such as compulsory participation in Web forums. Some schools look for a profit by charging outsiders for computer use. Centered on their own agendas and lacking a vision for students, many principals keep the computer classroom safely locked and make little pretense of being leaders in technology for education.

Certainly, modern society requires the use of computers as technical devices to solve substantial problems. In my own region, with all its poverty, we buy "for the future," often without a concrete need; when the future arrives, the equipment is obsolete. Shouldn't educational reform embrace not only school management and purchase of equipment, but also educational goals, content, teaching methods, and assessment criteria? Shouldn't students be involved in forging their own education in this new world? If these aims were embraced, technology would enhance education in every school.

Table 1 lists some different ways of using technology, with their efficiency ranked from 0 to 5. Notice that I do not present computer rooms as a prerequisite for introducing technology in schools. Schools need the equipment, but how they arrange it is up to them. My scale of respective efficiencies is a subjective one, but it is based on my evaluation of the most advanced schools I know in Armenia. What follows is a summation of my observations in seven areas of computer use by these schools.

Table 1 **School computers and office equipment + the Internet**

Sphere of usage	Way of using	Efficiency rating	Suggested ways of using
Computer science classes	Elementary BASIC and Pascal languages	1-2	Graphic and logic courses in computer science for middle grades, programming in more complicated languages in high school
Technological support across the curriculum	CD course in separate subjects	0-1	Using technology in preparation of lessons, in information support of a lesson, in new formats of students' work, in keeping individual journals and portfolios
School office work	Typing and printing out documents	5	Full computerization of school office, including creation of a general database, reporting on academic progress, and accounting
Information resource	Limited at present	0-1	Qualitatively new forms of work for the library and subject rooms, as sources of necessary information in any accessible form, including the Internet
Means of communication	E-mail, online projects	4	Creation of uniform information space for education system, including schools and administration at all levels
Commercial usage	Few good ways at present	0	Paid lessons in programming, development of programs, Web resources, editing and preparing layouts, work on grant projects
Services for community	Paid computer courses	2-3	Information and publishing services to housing and communal services and condominiums; paid time for private persons

1. Computer science classes

I am not sure whether BASIC or some other computer language should be studied in schools today. BASIC readily conveys initial ideas about programming. But I believe the real task for schools is to provide children with apt skills for using computer technologies. Our children learn to communicate with and through the computer very easily and quickly. For them it is no more difficult than a Game Boy or calculator. So it is important to give them access to computers starting no later than middle school. We need to remember that the more practical and creative work children do, the better they master technique and technology.

Children gladly use programs that engage their creativity and imagination. Therefore the task for schools is to develop or acquire active training programs that are interesting and effective for children in middle grades. The same approach is appropriate for senior classes. Today the departments of applied mathematics at the state university level and of computer science in polytechnical universities are the most popular among school graduates, but you can hardly find a school that offers an additional course in computer programming.

If we want to have effective education, we should stick to the main guideline of modern education—constructivism—which basically involves the study of subjects that are of practical value and interest to students and actively engages them in their own education. In the West this is sometimes achieved even in elementary grades. I believe we are quite able to develop our own constructivist approaches, maybe in the form of early professional profiling. But one thing is certain—training should be noncompulsory, active, and of practical value for students. Rudimentary lessons in the use of Word, Excel, and the Internet should not be regarded as computer-science training. Children will acquire such basic skills without much effort and hone them with practice.

2. Technological support across the curriculum

In Table 1, the only technology support for teaching other subjects is a CD, because our schools seldom use computers in any other way, except for simple duplication of textual materials. Even CDs are seldom used properly. Don't be misled by the abundance of, say, content area CDs for Russian speakers. These are designed for students' independent work outside of class, and in effect are just extra manuals used along with the textbook. We still do not have any software designed for their use in class. Everyone is aware of this situation, though few admit it openly. Certainly, there are advantages in showing, for instance, a computer display about dynamic processes in physics. But what teacher goes to the school's only computer room to show students just one experiment? And why should students read texts from a computer display if the same material is available in the textbook?

However, computers really work if they become an inquiry tool in students' hands. When I visited a high school chemistry class in Bozeman, Montana, USA, students were taking a test that consisted of finding answers to given questions. They did not have to rely on their memories, because computers connected to the Internet were at their disposal. For good performance it was necessary only to have enough knowledge in chemistry to find the necessary information from various sources. Some searched the Internet, some used books, but in all cases the testing process turned into an active way of studying chemistry. The teacher's skill consisted of designing a test that would be feasible and useful for students.

In my own school, we also use computers for student research and for preparing essays and abstracts. Students are encouraged to make their own websites on given topics. With a teacher's help, they may compile Internet reference directories. The work sometimes is carried out over several months by groups of two to four students, whose teachers advise them on design and content. When the site is ready, it is put on the Internet for general use and further expansion, thus increasing the students' responsibility and giving practical importance to their work.

We now have the experience of such work on Armenian literature, biology, handicrafts, art (drawing), and geography. During the upcoming academic year we plan to create a Who's Who in history in the Armenian language. The students will not only master the subject, but also obtain skills of Web design and computer operation. I'm not suggesting that our approach is perfect. It is just another possibility; if a teacher has more effective ways of instruction, he or she should use them.

Technology at school can be especially useful for teachers, who should have an idea of computer and Web opportunities and resources in their content areas and be able to use them. This way they will find the best formats for working with students, and their advice will be more substantial. Lesson plans and tests are also available on the Internet.

Technology is invaluable for keeping student journals and portfolios, with access usually given only to those who have a right to know about the students and their academic progress. In elementary grades a paper folder may contain a student's written work and drawings. But by middle school, it may be more practical to have a "virtual" portfolio into which each teacher can put an evaluation of the student's work. The student also has a place to exhibit work, and parents can communicate through the portfolio with teachers. I encourage putting everything there, even seemingly insignificant things. In due time, you will have a real picture of the dynamics of students' development. Such a portfolio can be useful both to students and parents even if they have no home Internet access. When they come to school, your conversation with them will be content rich and constructive. You will be able to show them things rather than just describe them. It is also possible to introduce virtual tutoring, which is becoming popular in more advanced countries.

3. School office work

At present all Armenian schools are undergoing an organizational reform, and quite a revolutionary one in my opinion. The status of a state noncommercial enterprise gives schools much independence in the legal, financial, personnel, and economic spheres. And it's important that school office support be adequate. You can't demand that teachers be computer literate and use new technologies in class if the administration does not use them.

School office support embraces, among other things, passport registration of students and teachers, timetables and reporting for given lessons, accounting, and the keeping of class journals and progress records. As in any modern office, schools need to be able to print out documents and forms easily and maintain computer-based external correspondence and internal documentation. At some point we will also start exchanging reporting and information documents and data with higher offices and partner organizations.

It is certainly difficult to computerize everything at once; many school administrative and office staff can, at best, produce only text documents in Word. But it is necessary to begin. You can use standard packages such as Access or Excel to enter the first data. Start your database with the most important data and develop it from there. In a short time, the existence of the database will simplify much office work and improve its accuracy. The use of standard databases is also desirable for the further vertical development of information exchange between districts and higher offices.

4. Information resources

During a conversation, Tigran Zargaryan, the author of a library office program, called all information technologies and the Internet a global library of information—and they really are. The main skill that students should develop is the ability to use this library. Unfortunately we don't pay enough attention to this, even though international foundations like Eurasia and the Open Society Institute consider it a priority. In my region, librarians still keep information about subscribers and books on cards. But you should try to put two or three computers in your school library and purchase access to available online library resources. Teachers and students will soon start searching the Internet for the things they need, even without assistance.

Work in the library is a natural part of education. Modern lessons demand serious and thorough preparation on the part of teachers, as well as the skill to use the information on the part of students. All this can and should happen in the library, the center that provides support in content, methods, and information technology to the whole school. And the librarian should be a competent adviser for all users.

In Western schools I have visited, the library is a full-time part of the system. But many of our school libraries function intensively only two weeks a year, when textbooks are distributed and when they are collected. (This may overstate the case a little; I hope that some librarians are actively involved in education year round.)

5. Means of communication

Adult educational, para-educational, and funding communities are always in search of topics for virtual dialogue among students. A glance at these forums discloses all sorts of topics:

patriotism (www.projectharmony.am),
human rights (www.humanist.am and www.distancelearning.am),
school websites (www.projectharmony.am and www.schoolnet.am),
essays on a given theme (www.schoolnet.am and www.iaern.am),
virtual art exhibitions (www.schoolnet.am and www.yfa.am),
and students' self-management (www.projectharmony.am and www.schoolnet.am).

What is the point? If we look at grant applications (all the above are grant programs), we'll find very convincing arguments for using the Internet for legal literacy and civic education, and for introducing democratic norms, leadership skills, and aesthetic taste in students. Frankly, I do not think that we'll have more democracy (even at school) if two or three students, instructed by a paid coordinator, write one message each to such a forum. Nor do I think that students' aesthetic taste will develop greatly if a coordinator scans and sends one or two images made by a young school artist to a virtual gallery. I doubt that prizes will help either. By encouraging a few winners of such contests, we do not secure mass participation, do not raise real interest in them, and do not make them really content rich. The Internet becomes a game where content is subordinate to the idea of making use of equipment.

Communication opportunities will be used seriously and substantially in schools only if there is a real and serious need. A good example would be the Armenian interschool project for students' self-management (DEEP program, SbS Foundation). The project supported sessions of school extracurricular study groups devoted to democracy and human rights. The

forum at the interschool portal www.schoolnet.am was used as an efficient form of communication with other schools, for drawing up schedules and notifying school coordinators, and as a bulletin board and place to report on work. When using the forum, the project participants weren't thinking about Internet opportunities but of the direct project tasks. They did not even need an extra course to become users. Their only concern was the quality of connection so that their plans would work out well.

Creating a uniform information educational space through such an interschool portal is an example of the wise use of virtual space. Four years of www.schoolnet.am have shown the good sense of such an approach. The portal is popular with teachers, too, because they can find practically any information easily and quickly, including normative documents, news, announcements of competitions, and instructional and methodological literature. The portal allows visitors to offer new information themselves and enter it on the site. They can also find addresses of educational sites and organizations. The statistics show the growth of the site's popularity: In the first months the number of daily users was 5–10 people, while now the site is visited more than 700 times a month. It ranks among the area's top 100 sites generally and is the most popular among educational sites. The portal conducts its own projects; a recent one was the accommodation of instructional and methodological publications that are difficult to obtain but are of interest to all innovative teachers.

6. Commercial use

Since computers first appeared in schools, people have been talking about paid services. It seemed this idea would diminish in time with the growing numbers of computers in schools and homes. But instead it seems to have flared up recently with astonishing intensity. Even international funds and organizations that provide equipment demand that schools introduce paid services and make a profit. What for? Probably the proponents mean to teach schools real management and how to become self-sustaining. It's argued that such paid courses and services involve many people and stimulate development of technology in schools. The intentions are good, but the results are usually negative.

Let's start with self-repayment. A good manager should be able to get top profit from using equipment without changing its intended purpose. The main product of schools is a well-educated and informed young person possessing all necessary vital skills. Thus the main "profit" from school computers should consist in producing this very product. And for this, the computers should be used "directly" (see numbers 1–5, above, of this article). If we stick to this goal, payback may be considered 100%, and there will be no time to use computers in any other way.

On the financial side, let me point out two things. First, in a large school economy the payment of the equivalent of US$50 a month for the Internet should not be a problem—it is about the same fee as for the telephone and much less than for electricity or heating. Second, computers in a modern school can repay their investment not through a primitive sort of rent but in a more rational and worthy way: as an aid in teaching programming and in the development of various educational programs, Web resources, editing and layout work, and grant applications—that is, through work that stimulates the professional growth of employees and allows for the participation of students.

7. Services for the community

In view of the situation described above, there is little point in speaking about paid services to community members. The well-to-do have their own computers, at work or at home. Those who are not wealthy can't pay for any service that is not a pressing need. On the contrary, it makes sense (and some schools already do it) to render free services. For example, one school received a donation for computers with the stipulation that it offer free services to all members of the community. The advantages of such an approach are evident, both in increasing the rating of the school, and in helping those with limited resources. It is even possible to render information and publishing services to housing and other agencies.

Conclusion

Everything in the foregoing discussion points to the need for rational and imaginative use of computers in education. We need clear educational goals first, then the computers and software to achieve them.

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