

AUTHORING ISN'T TELLING - FROM STORY TO TEXT IN EARLY LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

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Within the context of school, unless students and teachers share something in books and reading or print materials ... teachers do not count children's print encounters as reading. (Wheeler 1984: 612)

As adult readers, most of us are able to recognise text as a construction of its author. We are able to disassemble a story in progress, to label the structures which are artifices of the author and to retain the integrity of the voice of the storyteller in the story. We are able to listen to our children telling stories and to recognise the different voices they use in the telling: the personal voice 'faithfully' recounting events; the storyteller using the distanced narrative voice of one who has seen, at least in the mind's eye, and can synthesize a new reality; and the author, who can contrive a storytelling voice to reorganise and record the narrative of their *inner speech* (Luria 1969) in clear consciousness of an external and probably demanding audience.

In exploring the development of childrens' skill as authors, it is important that we recognise the fundamental differences between these roles while simultaneously accepting the difficulty of separating them during the authoring process.

Somehow young writers need to recognise that writing is a way of creating from a monologue with self, a dialogue with others. (Arnold, 1991: 25)

The child as subject of an event or sequence of events is not always able to present more than a recounting of those events. The recount is oral, the structure is generally chronological and the genre is, albeit loosely sometimes, identifiable as a record of real events. The story-teller presents a similarly oral account but the same events are ordered and shaped into a more consciously identifiable genre which bears the structuring markers of a retelling rather than a mere recounting. Nonetheless, the story is unabashedly oral in its presentation. It requires the presence of the story-teller, the voice tones, the pauses, the inflections, the hand and facial gestures and the ring of sincerity which establish that, while it might be a story, it is a story based on a reality.

We heard the men and women chanting their poems, since Gipsy poems are always sung - not once, not twice, but three times so that people will learn them by heart and sing them whenever they feel like singing. (Ramati 1985: 77)

An author, on the other hand, is identifiable in the shift from oral to literate presentation. The markers which establish the literate story-teller are established without resort to gesture, inflection, audible voice or physical appearance. The literary story-teller relies on an identifiable mastery of the written word to establish that same 'ring of sincerity' which story-tellers achieve with their physical presence. The need for physical control over the mechanics of writing and, indeed, of functional literary grammar to the level of genre consciousness (Cranny-Francis & Martin 1993) are seen as critical in moving from the voice of the story-teller to the voice of the author.

In this paper, I am exploring some of the complexities of the emergent capacity of the early childhood author - for whom the task of literary authorship is complicated by the need to adhere to authorial convention. For whom, furthermore, the very task of committing the story to paper is a rocky road pitted with syntactic rules [which defy phonological rules] and strewn with spelling and grammatical protocols. For this author moreover the very structuring of letters within a word is complicated by the need for delineation between varying and various type-faces and a school-valorised writing script. This paper, then, is an exploration of some of the possibilities arising from the story of **The Mystrey Voto**.

The Mystrey voto!
one day Jess got a nyo cram and she
toc the 1st voto of my cat. she put it up
in her room. And looknt at it ceple she sou
ti meaur she toc a step pac and thort
about it and then she rod Jess time
for tea coming morn. she side nes and
sosqs we had that last night. Eat it but
no. trus morn it makes me sik I no your
trick.

To simplify decoding, the literal translation into *standard* English is included below.

The Mystery Photo

One day Jess got a new camera and she took the first photo of my cat. She put it up in her room and looked at it carefully. She saw it move. She took a step back and thought about it and then she heard, 'Jess, time for tea'. 'Coming Mum', she sighed.

'Peas and sausages. We had that last night'.

'Eat it'.

'But!'.

'No buts'.

'Mum, it makes me sick'.

'I know your tricks'.

The story is interesting for a variety of reasons but its major feature is the clarity with which it demonstrates the transition levels between oral and literal storytelling, a transition which Meek touches upon in observing that a beginning school reader's

intonation may become strange, or seem to be so, if he has been reading 'naturally' up to this stage. There is a kind of school reading voice, a one-toned word-by-word effect that often makes parents wary because its jerkiness seems unfluent and not like real reading. (1982: 79)

Recognition of the difference between home reading - which is, indeed, part of normal home life for many children - and school reading - which is seen by young students to be 'different' and essentially contrived, has been observed by a large number of writers in the field. Christine Walton, referring specifically to transition between Aboriginal or Kriol language learning and English language learning, provides a timely warning about the assumptions of 'naturalness' made by Meek.

A description of literacy learning as 'natural' associates it with some kind of inevitable biological unfolding, rather than something that is historically, socially and culturally produced. It also suggests universality, when it is clear from the historical and cross-cultural literature that this is inappropriate. (1993: 40)

This assumption of 'naturalness' in the link between story telling and story writing is at the very nub of the difficulties Jess displays in relating her story. Far from its being 'some kind of biological unfolding', Jess's story is a painful recognition of the lack of similarity between the spoken story and the written story, between the role of the storyteller and the role of the author. Furthermore, as Haas Dyson argues:

children look for rules governing how literacy tasks are to be conducted. However, school tasks are centred in the school world and are frequently directed toward developing prescribed literary skills. These tasks may not make 'human sense' to children. (1984: 624)

When we agree with Chomsky (1986) that storytelling, narration, is a natural feature of society, we do not necessarily take the step assumed by many English educators and argue that literal storytelling is a written extension of oral storytelling. In fact, it is demonstrable that raconteurs do not always make good authors and that, as Walter Ong (1982) articulates so clearly, the majority of societies operate from an oral tradition, have no literal equivalent and lose their identity when their stories are confined to the rigid permanency of print.

The age of the emerging author, Jess, is not problematic to the early childhood teacher. Jess has a well developed ability to record words, a strongly phonetic approach to spelling - most of her phonic representations are accurate - and a clear sense of the features of the literary, as opposed to the oral, story. She is operating in many respects at a year 2 level yet the variation in skills development suggests a continued need for scaffolding her development (Applebee & Langer 1984) as a story teller, as a writer and as an author.

In Frank Smith's (1978) 'theory of the world in the head', the units of learning do not necessarily match with the teaching which generated them. Fortunately, however,

instances of teaching and learning sometimes connect [in the classroom]: teachers do sometimes provide experiences that particular children act on and shape in their own sense-making activity. Sometimes the connection is, in a general way, the one the teacher intends. (Lindfors 1984: 600)

Beginning, middle and end

If our purpose as teachers is to 'respond to what the child is trying to do' (Smith 1978) then we have to look more closely at the demands of the learning leaps we expect children to make when we 'teach'. Jess's ability to integrate direct speech into her story, regardless of the lack of standard punctuation, is a considerable achievement. That she can integrate the speech as punctuation to the narrative flow can be argued to be a simple recalling of events as they happened but it is much more than this. Jess has already removed herself from the role of narrator to become 'author'. She is now recording the narrative as a literary event in which the interruption of the protagonist's mother necessarily destroys the narrative flow. The mother is both a disruption to the action and a *deus ex machina*, an artifice of the author to bring the story to the coherent conclusion which it otherwise lacks. 'And they all lived happily ever after' or 'and then they woke up' are not sensible exit lines from the narrative because, in reality, there was not a coherent *literary* ending.

Jess is confronted with the challenge of devising an ending to match the literary dilemma presented by Mum's real-life interruption. The ending must, however, be true to the recall of events while, at the same time, satisfying the literary sensibilities of the author as reader.

Spelling and the climax of the story

Insofar as Jess is intending to tell a story, her punctuation, spelling and grammatical structures are subordinated to the *authentic* purpose of her writing. The cooperation of the cat is more critical than considerations of literal correctness. When the cat moves in the photograph, the photographer of the story is forced to take a step 'pac' and reconsider - after all, photographs are expected to 'freeze' motion. She has already looked at the cat 'cefle' (carefully) though perhaps for too long. This section represents the central conflict or crisis in the story, some might say the climax. The rising action is towards the culminating photograph but the plot line is broken. This tension in the story is also the tension in the author as she attempts to differentiate herself from the real-life Jess for whom the creation of a literary fiction is the reality. Coincident with this tension is the breakdown in spelling. 'She sow ti moov she toc a step pac and thort about it'. On the other hand, this section is the most clearly and formally punctuated.

In describing the activity of Bonita, also a second grader, Haas Dyson (1984) recalls that

She has just finished copying nine sentences from the board. She remarks, 'Let's see here. I could do number ten and be finished. Then I gotta put commas, periods and question marks... Ms Kane [her teacher] said some of 'em have commas but not all of 'em.' With that in mind, Bonita examines the first sentence. (Haas Dyson 1984: 622)

In speaking of authentic writing as satisfying its author's intentions, Edelsky and Smith (1984) note that when writing is inauthentic, children are concerned with finding out how the assignment is supposed to be done. Rather than writing confidently from her own point of view to satisfy her own purposes, the inauthentic writer is seeking to satisfy the needs, demands or wishes of some external, and quite possibly unreasonable, audience. At school, this is almost certainly the teacher. As Haas Dyson notes,

A helpful perspective may be to consider literacy an activity, a tool, rather than a set of skills. (Haas Dyson 1984: 624)

It is crucial that as readers we acknowledge Jess's transitional yet authentic status from retelling storyteller to literary author if we are to gain insight into this phenomenon of maximum 'errors' at the point of maximum dramatic tension in the story. Jess's handwriting suggests that her competence with the written word is still marginal. As a writer she still has to concentrate consciously on both letter formation and spelling while she is composing. The likelihood, under these circumstances, of her composition carrying much more than literal sense is not high. Yet the motivation to write a story - in this case to gain her grandmother's attention from her older sisters - subsumes all other difficulties. As Arnold's (1991) students might observe, she has connected with the magic in her brain.

Jess's determination to write a 'real' story requires, initially, the selection of an event worthy of retelling. The subsequent steps toward authorship, already noted, involve increasing removal from the sequential reality of the initial sequence of events until literary authorship is established.

While it is tempting to isolate the mistakes in spelling from each other and from the story itself, more can be gained by considering the placement and intention of the passage within which these mistakes occur. As has been shown, the maximum density and variety of mistakes occurs at the point of maximum tension in the

story - tension between author and real life story-teller, between Jess of the story and Jess telling the story and, in terms of plot development, tension between the author's photographer and her feline subject.

It is in this climactic section that Jess the author, in rapid succession, confuses 'o' with 'a' in 'sow', reverses letters in 'ti', chooses the wrong combination for the long 'o' sound in 'moov', continues her mis-hearing of the long 'o' and omission of the 'k' in 'toc', inverts the initial consonant and omits ultimate 'k' in 'pac', and reverses 'ou' in 'about'. The phonetic spelling of 'thought' is no more a mistake than the phonetic 'cefle' which precedes this passage. Jess has a generally accurate sense for phonetic word attack.

For too many parents and teachers, this apparent profusion of errors remains an irresistible challenge to take up the red correction pen of the *keeper of the cultural keys*. But Jess has made no 'mistakes' which are irredeemable if we are focusing on what she *can* do rather than what she cannot. The reversal and inversions are, as we recognise, common slips on the way to establishing left/right dominance patterns, the hard 'c' is phonetically identical with the Saxon 'ck' while the 'o' has merely lost its supporting vertical for the moment - it looks similar and in the rush and confusion of authorship... This point, however, needs to be explored further but in a changed context.

many school writing opportunities restrict children from engaging in the whole writing process ... the children do not have to formulate their own thoughts into graphically encoded words. (Haas Dyson 1984: 620)

Brian Cambourne's (1987) emphasis on engagement as a prerequisite for authentic development of whole language facility is exemplified in Jess the risk-taker as emerging author. Her dubious facility with the mechanics of her 'linguistic data pool' (Harste, Burke & Woodward 1983) is, however, subjugated by her authorial determination.

Spelling, linguistic facility and the task of authoring

Discussing the value of invented spelling as a necessary transitional phase toward standard spelling, John Schafer (1988) observes the shift in what Sowers (1982) terms 'locus of control' in spelling development. From primary reliance upon their ears and the place of articulation in the mouth, spellers increasingly experience the sight of words in print and

begin to rely more on their eyes and their visual memory. As they move to these new loci of control, their spelling becomes more conventional.
(Schafer 1988: 99)

Schafer's observations appear to be based on the assumption that children develop their speech patterns towards some 'standard' pronunciation which, presumably, adults use but children are in the process of discovering. As this is demonstrably inaccurate in America, so it is in Australia. Jess's *Voto* is spelt consistently with the German *Volkswagen* though we are unlikely to assume that she is from a German speaking home because the grammar is not consistent with this assumption.

Jess the author displays three major types of spelling problems:

reversals and inversions such as 'ti' for 'it', 'abuot' for 'about' and 'cram' for 'camera';

apparent phonic errors such as 'voto' for 'photo' and 'toc' for 'took'; and

phonetically correct graphological miscues such as 'nyo' for 'new', 'moov' for 'move' or 'cefle' for 'carefully'.

Much has been written on the development of left/right dominance and its impact on beginning writers so the question of when and what to do with reversals and inversions need take no time in this paper.

More important than any of Jess's spelling problems is her spelling/linguistic knowledge. As indicated in a previous paper (Béchervaise 1992), internalisation of the knowledge that words are always spelt in the same way provides a coherent framework for repeated use of an unfamiliar word. Having determined the spelling of 'photo' to be 'voto', Jess uses this form consistently, as she does with 'toc'. The late development of differentiation between the unvoiced and voiced phonemes interpreted graphemically as 'ph' and 'v' is acceptable at age 7 or 8 though the short 'o' in 'toc' represents a matter for attention if it is consistent between stories (This matter will be explored further in discussing the potential for hearing problems as a source of error.)

The danger exists, though, that school literacy tasks will increase children's sensitivity to accomplishing the teacher's intentions rather than their own. (Haas Dyson 1984: 625)

Further evidence of Jess's linguistic facility derives from her interpolation of direct speech into the story. With punctuation and layout added, the final passage becomes:

And then she heard, 'Jess, time for tea.'
'Coming, Mum' she said.
'Peas and sausages! We had that last night.'
'Eat it.'
'But.'
'No buts.'
'Mum, it makes me sick.'
'I know your tricks.'

Mum may know Jess's tricks but Jess knows the tricks of the author in trouble. Resolution of the dilemma presented by the moving cat in the photo can only be resolved by resort to the *deus ex machina* of motherly intervention. The story may not have a rounded literary finish, a Leavisitic sense of compositional or even aesthetic wholeness, but it has a resolution which every young child can empathise with - adults have a capacity for ending fantastic adventures which is only rivalled by the capacity for alarm clocks to shatter pleasant dreams.

Phonetically correct graphological miscues such as 'yo', 'moov', 'cefle' and 'no' represent a pleasing tendency to take risks in approximating spelling (Cambourne & Turbill 1987). The author's productive flow of familiar vocabulary and the authenticity of the voice are undisturbed by her lack of familiarity with a standard spelling. The intention is clear, the standard form can be developed later when much more reading has been done, when the component graphemes for 'care-fully' have been internalised. In the meantime, we can cope with 'pes and sosgs' for tea as easily as with 'peas and sausages' and a lot more easily than with the demands of Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* or even Carroll's *Jabberwocky*.

Spelling and the fallibility of the human ear

Jess's story, as we have seen, contains sufficient punctuation to render it sensible to the reader without necessarily adhering to the standard forms which will come with her continued experience as a reader. Of greater significance for the listener are the apparently inexplicable errors in spelling from an otherwise accurate phonic recorder. Two alternative suggestions may be proposed for these lapses: the words are spelt as Jess most commonly hears them spoken by her primary care-

givers or she is not hearing them accurately. Specifically, as already noted, the words 'toc' for 'took', 'rod' for 'heard' and 'side' for 'said' - or is it actually 'sighed' - can be added to the more deceptive 'looknt' - which may or may not have a deleted miscue between the 'k' and the 'n' and which may even contain an uncertain apostrophe '...n't'. A secondary teacher would certainly consider the apostrophe possible though it is unlikely in Jess's story.

The miscuing of 'looknt' instead of 'looked' can derive from a mistake with the suffix - but Jess is phonetically rather than sight oriented - or from a confusion generated by mishearing of the word. A third, perhaps more likely, explanation relates the sound of the terminal consonant 'd' when it precedes the short vowel in 'at' with a terminal 't' so that the combination becomes 'lookt at', because Jess says the words singly as she writes them, in which case she may well say and write 'lookt' before she says and then writes 'at'. Jess's linguistic knowledge nonetheless assures her that 'kt' is an unlikely combination for a suffix while 'nt' is quite common. In this case, the writer's inexperience with the vagaries of phonetics may be confused with her emerging attention to the appearance of terminal graphemic combinations - sight and sound are not, as Schafer (1988) observes, clearly differentiated.

While the case of the confused suffix 'nt' may be explained in a variety of ways, it is more difficult to rationalise the misspelling of the other identified words - 'rod' is not phonetically similar to 'heard' - unless there is also a reversal of 'o' and 'r' from which Jess 'ord' her mother call. Neither 'side' for 'said' nor 'toc' for 'took' lend themselves to this treatment. Both appear to be incorrectly recorded though the possibility of 'sighed' would eliminate this word from contention.

Several of the phonetically incorrect words in Jess's story may be explained by alternative theses, nevertheless the accumulation of errors within a relatively short story suggests that the two major possibilities should be investigated further.

'Hearing' spelling

If Jess is displaying inaccurate phonetic response in her recording of the words 'toc' for 'took', 'rod' for 'heard' and 'side' for 'said', it is important to determine whether she is hearing these words accurately, whether they are close representations of her major care-givers' accents or whether they are the best approximations she is capable of making to what she hears through some

impairment. Her reading of the story to her editor/teacher will establish whether the words are accurate phonic representations of her speech. If they are, then accents and hearing dysfunctions remain as sources for the continuing errors. Informal discussion with the care-givers may finally identify the source of the error which, if it is an apparent dysfunction, needs to be notified for further, specialist attention.

‘Correcting’ the story

While it is possible to determine the origins of almost all of Jess’s miscues and misspellings, the teacher in all of us screams for a point of entry into the editing process. Where can we begin and what can we do to make the conference between author/student and editor/teacher meaningful without destroying the confidence and integrity with which the story has been initiated? After all, Jess

... believes she has achieved her intention in writing a story. Her hand writing is acceptably legible and many of the words are clearly identifiable. (Béchervaise 1992: 3)

Having established the authenticity of the story, the miscues which are probably developmentally based and those which may be the result of mishearing, the phonetically correct yet graphologically miscued spelling and the mere reversals, it remains to rate these in some order of developmental priority.

My own preferences in conferencing will, no doubt, vary from those of other teachers but I believe that the errors which appear to derive from mishearing are of primary importance as they may be signalling functional hearing disorders. Early recognition of sight and hearing dysfunctions represents one of the more positive interventions the responsive teacher can make into a child’s early educational development.

My second priority in conferencing on spelling would be clarification of the structure available for the terminal consonant ‘k’ sound. Jess uses a hard ‘c’ for ‘took’ and ‘back’ but ‘k’ for ‘sick’, yet she is familiar with the terminal ‘ck’ which she uses in the final word of her story, ‘trick’. As the potential complexity for the misspelling of ‘took’ has been discussed, I would leave that word until the prior concern had been resolved and build on the spelling of ‘move’ in conjunction with the spelling of ‘took’.

Priority three, correction of the phonetically correct words would, at this stage, amount to presentation of the standard spelling without further discussion.

Priority four, if Jess is to have her story published in the class story-book, will require showing her the effect of using a new line for each new speaker in recording speech. As previously discussed, I am not concerned, at this stage, with the use of quotation marks and the attendant confusion of punctuation which accompanies them.

The conferencing process will be completed with a re-writing of the story - with corrections - onto a standard size sheet of lined paper for printing and inclusion in the class story-book. Encouragement to illustrate will become the final step in the writing process from the author's point of view.

Conclusion

School literacy events can differ significantly from those of the child's home or day care ...written language in school is not simply embedded in daily routines but is frequently the focus of planned activities; that is, writing activities are often not primarily to entertain or communicate. (Haas Dyson 1984: 620)

Nevertheless,

... formal evaluation plays a major role in certain school literacy events; for example, a letter written to one's father may be judged on the use of complete sentences or correct letter formations rather than on its ability to please dad. (Haas Dyson 1984: 620)

Jess's story of the mystery photo provides a fascinating glimpse into the transitional world of the emergent author who, beleaguered with the complexities of grammar, spelling and punctuation, nevertheless retains sufficient vigour to press towards the authentic voice of the literary author (Moffett 1981). Casting herself adrift from the wiles of the story-teller, Jess launches into the uncertain sea of literary creation from an egocentricity typical of her age (Crago 1989) but with a confidence born of positive modelling. No one told her she couldn't write stories. Our responsibility as educators is to guide Jess in her becoming, rather than correct her deviations from the path we have determined for her arrival.

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