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EXPRESSIVE WRITING: THE TEACHER AND THE CLASSROOM

As people, we all use words in different ways at different times to achieve a number of different ends. Ultimately, however, we are using language to represent our own personal world of experiences, ideas and attitudes - to organise the present into a rich context made up of experiences derived from other places and other times. It is generally through the expressive function of language (both verbal and non-verbal) that we first make these representations and so this function is revealed by unrehearsed, free-flowing language which follows the speaker's/writer's changing preoccupations and flow of attention.

Expressive language is intimate and personal - language which is close to the self - as it meets only the demands of the speaker/writer and usually takes for granted that the audience is interested in who is speaking/writing, as well

as in what is being said. Very often this audience is intimate and trusted, an audience who "shares a great deal of the writer's context... so the writer can take much of the audience's knowledge and background for granted." (Janks, 1894) (1984?)

We use this expressive function of language to present our view of things - our beliefs, our ideas and our attitudes. In doing this we are in fact presenting ourselves and our own unique identities. And so it is by means of this expressive function of language that we interact and get to know one another as individuals - what we have in common and what makes us different from one another.

Because the developing child is constantly exploring, finding out and making sense of his environment, it seems very likely that much of his written and spoken language will be expressive in function. As the child matures however, this function may become too limited and the child may need to extend his writing functions to include both the poetic and the

transactional types. He does this in order to operate as a spectator upon the represented world (which Britton defines as "improvizing upon past experiences or ... drawing upon other people's experiences.") (Britton, 1971) and to become an active participant in the world's affairs ("operating in the active world." Britton, 1971). The child's writing has therefore, moved along the continuum from the less mature expressive response towards the more structured poetic and transactional functions.

If a child naturally makes the most use of the expressive function of language and expressive language is the function from which the poetic and transactional types of discourse develop, then it follows that the teacher will have to encourage and help the child to develop his expressive writing before the child is ready to attempt the more diverse poetic and transactional types of writing.

Although I have had very little experience in the classroom itself, by relating my reading

and lectures to what I have had, I have formulated some ideas about how I think teachers should encourage expressive writing, in this way "nurturing the matrix out of which the ... poetic and transactional types of discourse grow."

Because the expressive function of writing is so personal and intimate, reflecting closely the individuality of the writer, I feel that it is very important that the teacher accept each child in her class as an individual with personal views and ideas who will face individual problems in his writing development. Unless the child can sense that the teacher prizes his individuality, I don't think that the teacher will ever become the "intimate, trusted audience" so essential for the child to express his real opinion rather than writing what he thinks the teacher wants to read. The teacher can promote his trusting relationship by talking to the child about himself, as well as about his writing - encouraging the child while helping him to "make it sound better" (Swan.)

Sensitive marking of expressive writing would further promote the teacher-pupil / reader-writer relationship. This could be done by the teacher personally participating in the piece of writing - concentrating on the message (rather than spelling, grammatical errors and marks) and by adding comments or questions which show interest and extend the writers thoughts and ideas.

Another very important way for teachers to encourage expressive writing is to help their pupils to genuinely enjoy writing - for themselves - and not only because it has to be done. A teacher could encourage her pupils to keep diaries and journals, to write their own songs and poetry or to write regularly to a penfriend. By sharing with her pupils her own writing (letters, poems, plays etc.) the teacher will promote the idea of writing for pleasure and her pupils are likely to be more enthusiastic about their own writing.

Before a child can write, he must have something which he really wants to say. For this reason

I feel that encouraging a child to talk plays a large part in encouraging him to express himself in writing. This time for talking should not only take place in the context of the "writing period" but informal discussions should be a regular and important part of classroom life. These discussions should involve the whole class and should relate directly to the children and what they want to talk about. This will help the teacher to find out what interests and excites her class, and her pupils will feel that what they have to say is worthwhile. They will thus be more confident about expressing themselves verbally and non-verbally.

Because expressive writing is so personal, what the child is asked to write about must interest him and be a part of his experience. The reasons for the writing task too, should be made clear to him so that writing becomes something which is real and meaningful to him. This means that the teacher will have to be careful to keep the child and his interests central to her writing programme. In order to keep the children interes-

ted and involved in the writing process I feel that the teacher should relate what is happening inside the classroom to what is happening in the outside world. (This is where the classroom discussion could be a great help!) She could keep topics varied and meaningful by relating writing to current television programmes, news items, films, sports and fads. The writer's audience could be extended by making and publishing a school newspaper or newsletter, writing and sending letters to real people and sending pieces of writing into competitions. The writing task could be made more real to the child by turning stories into plays and acting them out, perhaps by compling a book of poems or by writing a class novel, chapter by chapter.

If writing is made real and meaningful to the child he will write more and his writing will improve. As his writing improves he may explore different ways of writing - moving naturally towards the more diverse writing forms.

Very often a child (or an adult!) will not know what he really means or wants to say, until

he has written it down and changed it around. For this reason I feel that the teacher should familiarize her pupils with the process of drafting and re-drafting a piece of writing. The techniques of selecting and rejecting, rewording and reordering should be taught while the child is becoming accustomed to the phases of pre-composition/planning, composing, revising, polishing and proofreading. While doing this, the children will be internalizing spelling and grammar while moving slowly towards the ability to produce the more formal structures demanded by the transactional and poetic types of writing. Hilary Janks suggests that this process of re-drafting is very important and that "where pupils have something they want to say, to a real audience, motivation to get it right is high." (Janks, 1984)

Although there must be many other ways in which a teacher can encourage writing in the classroom, I believe that above all, if she promotes in her pupils an enjoyment, interest and

enthusiasm for writing, she will be nurturing the matrix from which the poetic and transactional types of writing grow, in the best possible way.

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