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Interactive writing in a primary classroom

Interactive writing provides a means for teachers to engage in effective literacy instruction, not through isolated skills lessons, but within the framework of constructing texts filled with personal and collective meaning.

"We're going to finish up our list for our story map," Paige Furgerson explains to her kindergarten students. "Let's read what we have so far."

As Ali points to the words written on the paper attached to the easel, her classmates read along with her: "Trees, 3 bowls, 3 spoons, 3 chairs, house, 3 beds, 3 bears."

"I know that there are some other things that we need. Can you think about the story of 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears'? What else do we need to write on our list?" Miss Furgerson asks.

Brody suggests, "A window."

Joey requests, "Three bathrooms. One for each bear."

Katelin volunteers, "Goldilocks."

"Oh, you know what?" Furgerson says. "I think we really do need her. Did you hear what Katelin said, that we needed Goldilocks?"

"Goldilocks," the children repeat in unison.

"Goldilocks," Furgerson replies. "We need a Goldilocks. We're almost out of room right here." Furgerson points to the bottom of the list of items needed for the class story map. "So where should we write *Goldilocks*?" After the children decide that a new column needs to be started, they help Furgerson hear the sounds in the word *Goldilocks* and proceed to write the word.

"Let's say the word together, slowly," Furgerson reminds the children.

"Goldilocks. *O*, I hear an *o*," Adam states.

"I hear a *d*," Quang suggests.

"A *g*, a *g*," repeats Katelin.

After observing her children and listening to them encode *Goldilocks*, Furgerson explains. "There is an *o* and a *d* and a *g*. The *g* is at the beginning, Katelin. You come up and write the *g*, and then we'll let Adam write the *o* that he heard. Do you know what? This is a person's name, *Goldilocks*. Do you know what kind of a *g* we have to use?

Rosa replies, "A capital."

"A capital *g* because it's somebody's name." Furgerson then leads the class forward in their task. "That's a good capital *g*. Now, Adam, you come up and write the *o*. Class, let's say the word again to see if we hear any other sounds. Help me."

This scene took place in a kindergarten classroom at Ramirez Elementary School in Lubbock, Texas, USA. Of the 17 students in the class, 2 were Asian, 8 Hispanic, 6 non-Hispanic White, and one African American. Fifteen of the children received free or reduced-price lunch, and 6 had attended a prekindergarten program. The teacher, Paige Furgerson, and the children spent their days

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engaged in a variety of literacy activities, including interactive writing lessons like the one described above.

Roots of interactive writing

Interactive writing has its roots in the language experience approach developed by Ashton-Warner (1963) in which children dictated a text and the teacher acted as scribe. The text was then used as reading material for the youngsters. McKenzie (1985), working with British teachers, developed a process she called "shared writing" in which the teacher and children collaborated on a text to be written. The focus of the writing could come from a children's literature selection, an event experienced by the children in the class, or a topic under study in social studies or science. In McKenzie's model, the teacher served as scribe and usually used chart paper to create a text that then served as the students' reading text. As the charts accumulated, they were displayed around the room, surrounding the children with meaningful print.

Interactive writing, a form of shared writing, is part of the early literacy lesson framework (see Figure 1) developed by educators at The Ohio State University (Pinnell & McCarrier, 1994) to provide rich, educative experiences for young children, particularly those considered to be educationally at risk. The framework draws on the concept of emergent literacy, a term coined by Clay (1966), and is explicated by other early childhood educators (see Strickland & Morrow, 1989; Teale & Sulzby, 1986).

In the early literacy framework, the use of quality literature (Huck & Kerstetter, 1987) scaffolds the development and integration of all literacy processes (reading, writing, speaking, listening, thinking). Three to five trade books, which represent various genres, are read aloud to children each day. Prior to the construction of the students' list for their story map of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," Miss Furgerson had read aloud Galdone's (1972) version several times. The repeated readings helped students reconstruct the story line and recall characters and story sequence, the information necessary to generate their lists and construct the actual map. Often the focus of the daily interactive writing lesson was an extension of a book read aloud to the class.

Clay (1991) explained that children are active constructors of their own language and literacy. Their competence grows as they gain inner control over constructing meaning from print. This growth does not take place without environmental support. Rather, with supportive instruction, children develop in language and literacy competence (Vygotsky, 1962). The early literacy framework is a balanced program of instruction and independent exploration. Interactive writing provides opportunities for teachers to engage in instruction precisely at the point of student need.

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Interactive writing differs from shared writing in two important ways. First, children take an active role in the writing process by actually holding the pen and doing the writing. Second, the teacher's role changes as she scaffolds and explicates the children's emerging knowledge about print (Button, 1992). Through questioning and direct instruction, the teacher focuses the children's attention on the conventions of print such as spaces between words, left-to-right and top-to-bottom directionality, capital letters, and punctuation. Clay (1979) reminds teachers to utilize the child's strengths and not to do for the child "anything that she can teach him to do for himself" (p. 4).

Interactive writing in practice

To guide the interactive writing process and make children's knowledge about print explicit, the teacher might ask questions such as these:

"How many words are there in our sentence?"

"Where do we begin writing?"

Figure 1
The Ohio State University Early Literacy Learning Initiative
A framework for early literacy lessons

Element	Values
1. Reading aloud to children (rereading favorite selections)	Motivates children to read (shows purpose). Provides an adult demonstration. Develops sense of story. Develops knowledge of written language syntax and of how texts are structured. Increases vocabulary and linguistic repertoire. Supports intertextual ties through enjoyment and shared knowledge; creates community of readers.
2. Shared reading Rereading big books Rereading retellings Rereading alternative texts Rereading the products of interactive writing	Demonstrates early strategies. Builds sense of story and ability to predict. Demonstrates process of reading. Provides social support from the group. Provides opportunity to participate, behave like a reader.
3. Guided reading	Provides opportunity to problem solve while reading for meaning. Provides opportunity to use strategies on extended text. Challenges the reader and creates context for successful processing on novel texts. Provides opportunity for teacher guidance, demonstration, and explanation.
4. Independent reading	Children read on their own or with partners from a wide range of materials.
5. Shared writing	Children compose messages and stories; teacher supports process as scribe. Demonstrates how writing works.
6. Interactive writing	Demonstrates concepts of print, early strategies, and how words work. Provides opportunities to hear sounds in words and connect with letters. Helps children understand "building up" and "breaking down" processes in reading and writing. Provides opportunities to plan and construct texts.
7. Guided writing and writers' workshop Teacher guides the process and provides instruction	Demonstrates the process of writing. Provides opportunity for explicit teaching of various aspects of writing. Gives students the guidance they need to learn writing processes and produce high-quality products.
8. Independent writing Individual retellings Labeling "Speech balloons" Books and other pieces	Provides opportunity for independence. Provides chance to write for different purposes. Increases writers' ability to use different forms. Builds ability to write words and use punctuation. Fosters creativity and the ability to compose.
9. Letters, words, and how they work	Helps children learn to use visual aspects of print.

Extensions and themes: Drama, murals, story maps, innovations on text, surveys, science experiments, and others.
- Provides opportunities to interpret texts in different ways.
- Provides a way of revisiting a story.
- Fosters collaboration and enjoyment.
- Creates a community of readers.
- Provides efficient instruction through integration of content areas.

(continued)

Figure 1
The Ohio State University Early Literacy Learning Initiative (cont'd.)

Documentation of progress
- Provides information to guide daily teaching.
- Provides a way to track the progress of individual children.
- Provides a basis for reporting to parents.
- Helps a school staff assess the effectiveness of the instructional program.

Home and community involvement
- Brings reading and writing materials and new learning into children's homes.
- Gives children more opportunities to show their families what they are learning.
- Increases reading and writing opportunities for children.
- Demonstrates value and respect for children's homes.

Oral language is the foundation for all elements of the framework.

"After writing one word, what do we have to remember to do? Why?"

"What word are we writing next?"

"Say the word slowly. What sounds do you hear?"

"Can you write the letter that stands for that sound?"

"Can you find the letter on our alphabet chart that we need to write?"

"What comes at the end of the sentence?"

"Would that make sense?"

"Does that look right?"

"Would you point and read what we have written so far?"

These questions and the instruction they represent vary according to the knowledge and needs of the children (see Figure 2). For children beginning the process, the teacher may need to attend more to letter formation. At times the teacher may show a child a model or assist the child with the formation of the needed letter. As children gain competence, attention may shift to punctuation, capitalization, prefixes, suffixes, and phonetic structures such as digraphs, consonant blends, and vowel patterns.

An interactive writing lesson need not be lengthy. On the first day of kindergarten, Furgerson and her students engaged in interactive writing for 15 minutes. As the year progressed, lessons lasted from 20 to 30 minutes. The power of the lesson lies not in the length of the text constructed but in the quality of the interaction. Typically the children are seated on a carpet facing an easel holding unlined chart paper, a marking pen, correction tape, and a pointer. The teacher usually sits within easy reach of the easel, facing the children. Teachers have found interactive writing to be successful with classes that range in size from 15 to 32 children.

The environment the teacher creates during this process should support risk taking. Children are encouraged to take an active role in negotiating the text. The teacher assumes that the children are in the process of learning about print and that some of their responses will be approximations. The teacher explains to the children that because they and other people will be reading the story, it is important that the words be conventionally constructed. The teacher uses correction tape to mask preconventional attempts (the child's approximations) and helps the child to write the word, letter, or punctuation mark conventionally. Teacher sensitivity is needed to value the knowledge reflected in the attempt yet also to teach the standard conventions of print used in books such as the ones the children read.

For example, during the construction of a class big book about the incubation of eggs, a classroom experience that occurred late in the school year, the children decided to write the sentence: "When the chicks get bigger, we will send the chicks to the farm." After everyone repeated the sentence aloud, Furgerson asked the class what word needed to be written first. They agreed that the first word should be *when.* Rosa stepped up to the easel and wrote *wen.* Furgerson said, "It does sound like *w-e-n*, but we need an *h* before the *e*." She then cov-

Figure 2
Interactive writing expectations and guidelines in primary classrooms over a school year

Beginning of the year →	Later in the year →
Establish routine	**Routine established**
Negotiate simple text (a label)	Negotiate a more complex text
Construction of text may be completed in one day (news)	Construction of text continues over several days
Repeat orally word or line to be written	Count the words to be written before starting to write
The teacher will	*Students will*
Model hearing sounds in words	Hear dominant sounds in words
Model sound/symbol relationships	Represent sounds with symbols (letters)
Support letter recognition (using alphabet chart or chart listing class members' names)	Write letters without copy
Model and question for Concepts About Print (CAP): spacing, left-to-right directionality, top-to-bottom directionality, word-by-word matching during shared reading	Have control of core words
Link words to be written with names of children in the class	Begin linking known words to unknown words
	Leave spaces between words
	Use familiar chunks (*-ed*; *-ing*)
	Control word-by-word matching during shared reading
	Punctuate sentences on the run
	Write text with little support
	Make generalizations about print
The teacher may	
Write more of the text	
Write challenging parts of word/text	
Assist with letter formation	

ered the letters *en* with a piece of correction tape and asked Rosa to write an *h* and then the *en* that she initially had written. During the writing of the word *the* Simon wrote *teh*. For some of the children *the* was a known word, but Simon could not yet spell it conventionally. Xuchen responded, "You have the right letters but in *the* the *h* comes before the *e*." One of the children tore off a piece of correction tape and handed it to Simon to place over the letters *eh*. He then wrote *he*. Jane asked Furgerson, "What did it say?" After the teacher pronounced *teh*, Jane commented that it didn't make sense. The children agreed that *the* looked right and that *teh* neither made sense nor looked like a word they knew. This information confirmed for Furgerson that some of her students knew that what they wrote needed to make sense (semantics).

Texts for interactive writing represent many forms of writing. Children might want to create a list of characters from a story as part of the process of forming a story map. Survey questions might be used as a basis for interactive writing. For example, after reading the books written by their visiting author, Rafe Martin, the children created a survey chart to display their favorite book title. Children might retell a story they have read or write an alternative text. After students read *The Farm Concert* (Cowley, 1990), they wrote their own variant entitled "The Classroom Concert." Children might compose an invitation to a class party or write a letter to pen pals in another city. Recipes, a review of a trip, class news, and many other forms of communication can also serve as topics for interactive writing.

What interactive writing looks like in one classroom

At the beginning of the school year, Furgerson used informal assessments, including Clay's Observation Survey (Clay, 1993a), to determine the strengths and knowledge of her students. She found about half her children could write their names. Only two of the children could name all the letters of the alphabet. All of the children could identify the front of a book, distinguish between illustrations and print, and indicate where they would begin to read. They all knew print carried a message.

On the first day of kindergarten, Furgerson began with an interactive writing experience based on the focus book of their first thematic unit. After reading Galdone's (1975) *The Gingerbread Boy*, the class took a walking tour of the school to find gingerbread boys hidden in certain spots throughout the building. When they returned to the classroom, they created a list of the spots where the gingerbread boys were found. After explaining the purpose of the writing, Furgerson asked the students what word they wanted to write first on their list.

They decided to begin with the word *lab.* She asked the children where they should start writing. One child stepped forward to point to the upper left-hand corner of the chart paper. Furgerson asked the students to say the word aloud—*lab*—listening for the sounds they heard. Some of the students heard a *b* and some an *l.* At this initial point in the process, Furgerson took the responsibility of seriating the sounds. "Yes," she told the children, "we do hear a *b* and an *l.* When we write the word *lab*, the *l* comes first."

Furgerson knew Larry could write his name. "Larry," she said, "you come and write the *l.* You have an *l* in your name." After Larry wrote the letter *l*, the children said the word again, listening for additional sounds. Brody heard the sound represented by the letter *b*. While Brody came up to write the *b*, Furgerson explained to the class that Brody's name began with a *b*. Before he wrote the *b*, however, she explained that the letter *a* came before the *b* although it was hard to hear. Brody wrote the *a* and then the *b*.

Furgerson then called another child to come up to the chart and, using the pointer, point under the word they had just written for the class to read. She then asked where else they found gingerbread boys. They followed a similar process with other items on their list. Furgerson chose to write three words at this sitting and to add to the list on subsequent days. Interactive writing was a daily event in her classroom.

Furgerson built on the knowledge students had about the sounds represented by letters in their names. She used everything the children appeared to know at the time of the lesson and then, through demonstration and explanation, extended their knowledge by providing the letters representing unfamiliar sounds. Clay (1993b) states, "At the beginning of the school year what the child can write is a good indicator of what the child knows in detail about written language" (p. 11). As the children finished writing a word, a list, or a sentence, they read it. One child pointed under each word to help the others to track the print while reading. This process demonstrates in a powerful and immediate way the reciprocal nature of reading and writing.

Later in the year, the children were thoroughly familiar with the routine of interactive writing and much more sophisticated in their knowledge about the conventions of print. They were able to analyze the phonological features of the message to be written (hear sounds in words), sequence the sounds heard, represent the sounds they heard with letters, and discern many different patterns. The children were also aware that their purpose for writing dictated the type of writing they would undertake. When the class decided to reply to their Ohio pen pals, they knew their letter would begin with the line, "Dear Miss Patacca's Class," and what followed would be written from left to right across the page.

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In the spring the children decided to retell the story of Michael Rosen's (1989) *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*. They had spent several days listening to repeated readings of the book. Using interactive writing, they had made lists of the characters and the different settings from the story, which then served as references for an elaborate story map. To accompany the map, the children spent several days writing a retelling of the story.

Furgerson and the children negotiated the first line of the retelling. Borrowing in part from the text of the story, they decided to

write: "The children walked through the forest, stumble trip, stumble trip." They repeated the sentence several times to fix the message clearly in their minds and to give them something against which to monitor their writing. Furgerson then asked the children to count the words as they said the sentence. She asked them what word they would write first. At this point in the school year, *the* was a known word for all the children in the room. Miss Furgerson asked the children what they needed to remember. Most knew that they start writing in the upper left-hand corner of the page, begin the first word of the sentence with a capital letter, and leave a "hand space" between the words.

Although the focus of Furgerson's curriculum was not to teach her children to read, but to immerse them in meaningful print rich activities, most of them were reading by spring of their kindergarten year.

After writing and reading *the*, the children told Furgerson that the next word they needed to work on was *children.* This was not a known word for most of them. Following a routine well established at this point, the students said the word together slowly, yet naturally, thinking about the order of the sounds in the spoken word. One child commented that the word had two parts—*chil* and *dren.* Furgerson turned the child's observation into a teaching moment, explaining that, indeed, *children* had two syllables and showing the class how to clap as they said the word, one clap for each syllable. Capitalizing further on the observation, she told the students they would be listening for the sounds in the first syllable. They heard the first sound easily and all knew the digraph *ch.* Furgerson asked Chaz to come up to the easel and write the first two letters while the class said the first syllable again, listening for additional sounds.

Rosa said she heard an *i* like in *him.* At this point, most of the children were beginning to connect known words and new words. Rosa came up, took the marker from Chaz, and wrote the *i.* As Rosa repeated the word aloud while writing, she said she also could hear an *l.* Furgerson said, "You are right. You may write the *l*." She then asked the children to say the word again, listening for the sounds in the last syllable. Quang said he heard a *tr*. Furgerson said, "Yes. It does sound like a *tr*, but in this word it is a *dr*. *TR* and *dr* do sound almost alike." Quang came up to the easel and wrote the *dr.* After saying the word one more time, Joshua said he heard an *n.* Furgerson said, "Yes, you are right, there is an *n*. But before the *n*, there is an *e* which is harder to hear. Would you like to come up and write *en* for us?"

Throughout the school year the children also had 20 to 30 minutes every day to write independently either in their journals or at the writing center. This gave students time to use the knowledge gained from interactive writing instruction and time to take further risks as writers. They made independent choices about what to write about and how to organize their texts. They were encouraged to use invented spelling, copy from environmental print, and make use of their growing core of known words. Furgerson's observations of what the students wrote and how they wrote independently informed her teaching for future interactive writing sessions.

Literacy assessment

Assessment in the early literacy framework is ongoing as the teacher documents the children's growth over time. Furgerson used a checklist she developed to monitor the growth children exhibited through their journal writing. Although the children varied in their control of the conventions of print, they all thought of themselves as readers and writers. Although the focus of Furgerson's curriculum was not to teach her children to read but to immerse them in meaningful print-rich activities, most of them were reading by spring of their kindergarten year.

To document the growth her students made during the year and to provide information for next year's first-grade teacher, Furgerson and a class of trained undergradu-

ate language/literacy students administered the Observation Survey (Clay, 1993a) in May to all of the children. She analyzed the children's scores on each of the six tasks assessed and then compared the May scores with the September scores.

The children exhibited growth in all areas measured by the Observation Survey. In the spring of the year, 13 of 17 children were able to read with 90% or better accuracy books like *The Chick and the Duckling* (Ginsburg, 1972) and *Mary Wore Her Red Dress and Henry Wore His Green Sneakers* (Peek, 1985). These books have illustrations that provide moderate support for the reader and stories that tell about familiar objects. The stories contain varied, often repetitive, simple sentence patterns that include action such as, "'I am taking a walk,' said the Duckling." (See Peterson, 1991, for characteristics of texts to support beginning readers.)

The children improved the most in their ability to hear sounds in words as measured by the Dictation Task. In this task, children are asked to record a dictated sentence containing a possible 37 phonemes. Each child's attempt is scored by counting the number of letters (graphemes) written by the child that represent the sounds (phonemes) analyzed by the child. In the fall the children had a mean dictation score of 9.8 (maximum score = 37). The children represented primarily initial consonants. In the spring, the children's mean dictation score was 29 (almost three times higher than in the fall). The children's ability to hear sounds in words, practiced daily during interactive writing, enabled them to represent initial and final sounds heard in each word. In addition, they could accurately spell high-frequency words like *the*, *is*, and *it.* This growth in the Dictation Task is particularly significant given the importance of phonemic awareness as a predictor of success in learning to read (see Adams, 1990).

On the Writing Vocabulary Task of the Observation Survey children were asked to write as many words as they could in a 10-minute period. In the fall, the children's scores ranged from 0 to 20 with a mean score of 4.8. Many children were able to write their first name and names of family members like *mom* and *dad.* In the spring, the Writing Vocabulary scores ranged from 1 to 56 words written in a 10-minute period with a mean score of 23.9. In addition to writing names of family members and friends, the children wrote high-frequency words like *on*, *the*, *in*, *go*, and *to* and favorite words like *pizza* and *dog*.

Meeting individual students' needs

Furgerson used information from the Observation Survey, anecdotal notes, and writing checklists to help her meet the needs of each of her students. Valerie's fall Observation Survey summary indicated that she could recognize 14 of 54 letters, no high-frequency words, and 7 out of 24 concepts about print; could represent no phonemes on the Dictation Task; and could write no words during the Writing Vocabulary Task. During the interactive writing lesson, Furgerson built on Valerie's strengths, asking her to write the *l* and *a* when they were needed in words the class was writing, as these were 2 of the 14 letters Valerie knew. Valerie delighted everyone one day when she announced that the particular sentence the class was writing needed a question mark at the end. She quickly became in charge of question marks. As the year progressed, Furgerson also worked individually with Valerie at the teacher table during center time and guided her during journal writing. At the end of kindergarten Valerie recognized 46 of the 54 letters, no high-frequency words, and 14 of the 24 concepts about print; she could represent 3 phonemes on the Dictation Task, and on the Writing Vocabulary Task she could write her name. Furgerson stated that Valerie's spring scores exhibited growth even though the growth was atypical for children her age. Valerie also showed marked growth in other areas such as art and oral language. Even with the most supportive literacy framework, some children require more intensive instruction. Valerie would be a prime candidate for Reading Recovery (see Pinnell, Fried, & Estice, 1990).

Concluding remarks

Interactive writing provides an authentic means for instruction in phonics and other linguistic patterns within the context of meaningful text. Children learn the conventions of spelling, syntax, and semantics as they engage in the construction of letters, lists, and stories. Interactive writing is a tool that puts reading and learning about conventions into a dynam-

ic relationship. As children attend to meaningful text, they develop their knowledge of the conventions embedded in that text. As they gain more knowledge of conventions, they are able to construct and interpret more sophisticated messages.

Interactive writing is an important part of the early literacy lesson framework (see Figure 1) because it provides so many opportunities to teach directly about language conventions, sense of story, types of writing, and concepts about print. These teaching moments do not follow a specified sequence but evolve from the teacher's understanding of the students' needs. The early literacy lesson framework blends independent problem solving, shared literacy experiences, and teacher instruction within a literacy-rich classroom.

Too often teachers feel they must choose between using holistic literacy experiences and teaching basic skills. In interactive writing sessions, teachers do both at the same time. Interactive writing provides a means for teachers to engage in effective literacy instruction, not through isolated skills lessons, but within the framework of constructing texts filled with personal and collective meaning.

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