

WRITING AS INTERACTION

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"The writer is a lonely figure cut off from the stimulus and corrective of listeners. He must be a predictor of reactions and act on his predictions. He writes with one hand tied behind his back, being robbed of gesture. He is robbed too of his tone of voice and the aid of clues the environment provides. He is condemned to monologue; there is no one to help out, to fill the silences, put words in his mouth or make encouraging noises."
(Rosen 1971: 142)

Harold Rosen's picture in the excerpt above, of the 'writer-as-a-lonely-figure', being robbed of gesture and tone of voice, and invariably "condemned to monologue", represents, in a sense, the dilemma of every writer - from an accomplished Pulitzer Prize winner to a year one English-as-a-second-language "writer". The dilemma addresses, in part, the notion that writing, in contrast to speaking, requires that the interlocutor interact with an audience who is "distanced" from the writer. This "distancing" is in a sense a characteristic of writing. Unlike conversational discourse, for instance, where the speaker negotiates meaning by responding fairly constantly to multilevel signals from the hearer and alternating speaker/hearer roles, writing requires that writers distance and transpose themselves from the present context into a yet non-existent, imagined time and place when the reader will respond and interact with the text. As Collins and Michaels (1986) point out, "such a transposition in time and space requires the writer to make an inferential leap between placing the words on the page and their ultimate reception thereafter at some unspecified time and place" (p.207). One "problem" in writing, then, is to balance what can be assumed to be the audience's private background knowledge of the communicative intent of the text and what is the audience's ability to make inferences, which depends on both knowledge of language and knowledge of the real world.

While this dilemma is indeed a very real one, especially for the young writer, the impression conveyed in the excerpt from Rosen above, that the writer (because of the nature of his/her craft) is "condemned to monologue", can of course be challenged. Although the nature of interaction in writing is inherently different from interaction in speaking, this paper takes the view that writing is still very much an interactive enterprise in which writers interact intimately with (1) their text and (2) their audience. The lonely" writer ("lonely" because he is distanced from the audience) is, in fact,

active in his "loneliness", heaving and shaping a text, bouncing it off against impressions of a perceived audience, and re-shaping the text accordingly.

Section I of this paper highlights some aspects of the interactive nature of the writing enterprise, drawing briefly on the work of Vygotsky, Piaget and Bruner. Using this as a basis, sections II and III present two pedagogical activities, namely writing conferences and dialogue journals, which precisely serve to accentuate the interactive nature of writing in classroom contexts. Though many of the comments made here would generally be applicable across a broad spectrum of language learners, this paper focuses specifically on younger "writers".

I. Conceptual Underpinnings of Interaction.

Three lenses: Vygotsky, Piaget and Bruner

Interaction in writing has a dual nature: in one sense it is interpersonal in that the writer is interacting with a perceived audience—who might not often be easily or readily operationally defined, but is nevertheless there; in another sense, writing is intrapersonal, i.e. the writer is in interaction with himself or his "mind" - externalizing his internal thoughts. This section briefly examines both these dimensions of interaction (the interpersonal and the intrapersonal), through three perspectives: (1) Lev Vygotsky's theories on the origins of thought in dialogue (2) Jean Piaget's observations on the child constructing "knowledge" in interaction with his environment, and (3) Jerome Bruner's observations deriving from Vygotsky on "adult social assistance" to children's language acquisition. Each of these three perspectives serves to provide a different lens on the role of social discourse (and hence social interaction) in learning to write.

Vygotsky

Vygotsky addresses the intrapersonal aspect of writing when he explores the social dynamics of cognitive processes. A central theme in Vygotsky's two books *Language and Thought* and *Mind in Society* is the notion of "internalization". As Sowers (1984) put it, internalization involves the child transforming 'interpersonal' processes into "intrapersonal" ones *by working with a partner* in his or her "zone of proximal development". The "zone of proximal development" is another pivotal concept in Vygotskian psychology. It serves to delineate the next highest level of learning or development at which the child can perform, i.e. the level adjacent to the one at which he or she now performs *alone*.

To quote Vygotsky:

"Every function in the child's development appears twice: first on the social level, and later, on the individual level. The transformation of an interpersonal process into an intrapersonal one is the result of a long series of developmental events."

Learning then is not merely socially mediated, it begins in the social domain. Social interaction sets the stage for the internalization of interpersonal processes.

Shifting our terms of reference from the internalization of cognitive processes *in the abstract*, to the cognitive processes specifically implicit in the writing process, we can see one rationale for conducting writing conferences. The usefulness of writing conferences seems to be in providing the

infrastructure for a process of dialogue with a tutor, who may be a more experienced writer or even a peer. The internalization of this external process of dialogue helps the "apprentice" writer adopt a reflective stance towards a piece of writing. With increasing degrees of internalization and decreasing degrees of external, social support at each level of "proximal development", the writer makes progress as he or she moves up successive levels on the ladder of various "zones of proximal development". This aspect of the writing conference will be discussed at greater length in section II of the paper.

Piaget

Piaget's theories are generally opposed to Vygotsky's and serve as a useful counter-argument to some of his positions. Vygotsky focused on development of the social functions of speech in early childhood and saw thinking as the internalization of "socialized speech". By contrast, Piaget saw the child as an unsocialized being. For Piaget, the development of language has its genesis in the child's egocentric thinking processes. Because of a young child's inability to consider the perspective of another, his thinking proceeds from the individual to the social.

The difference between the Vygotsky and Piagetian models may also be expressed in the following terms: Vygotsky saw learning preceding development and Piaget saw development preceding learning. Despite differences in perspective; Piaget endorsed (1) the value of argument or dialogue or interaction in learning, and (2) that learning takes place in the social domain. Interactivity plays a critical part in that learning. In interacting with stimuli from his or her environment, the learner builds up hypotheses of the world, and tests or retests alternative hypotheses against new input. According to Flavel (1963):

"In the course of his contacts (and especially, his conflicts and arguments) with other children, the child increasingly finds himself forced to reexamine his own precepts in the light of those of others, and by so doing, gradually rids himself of cognitive egocentrism."

The interactive nature of learning in the Piagetian model, does have ramifications for writing instruction. One can see, in this regard, dialogue journals providing the young writer, with a concrete sense of the audience as he or she writes, interacting with someone specific; writing conferences, on the other hand, have the potential of building on the concrete sense of audience by allowing for a transfer of the sense of audience in contexts which may be less immediate. The interactivity of the writing conference sets the stage to challenge the learner's original precepts of audience, among other things, and to provide alternative perspectives and positions to allow him or her to construct for himself or herself an alternative position, thereby becoming more and more socially responsive. The need to "rid [oneself] of cognitive egocentrism" is vital in writing when one has to consider also the perspective on one's audience who in turn would be at the other end of the text.

Bruner

Bruner underscored the role of "social assistance" in learning to use both spoken and written language. Despite essential differences between learning to talk and learning to write (arising from the observation that speech is biologically determined behavior while literacy is culturally

determined), Bruner maintained that social support systems engaged in social discourse play a vital role in developing metalinguistic awareness of, for instance, conversational turns in speaking or rhetorical conventions in writing. He used the metaphor "scaffolding" to refer to the type of social assistance provided to learners and investigated scaffolding in tutoring, problem-solving and mother-infant interactions. From this series of investigations he identified broad characteristics of social supports to learning. "Scaffolding" or the social supports to learning would help, among other things to perform the following functions: to focus the child on the task; to identify "critical" (as opposed to "peripheral") features of the task that require immediate attention; to act as a buffer on frustration; and to provide a framework in which roles can be reversed, where learners themselves will ultimately be able to initiate solutions and set the agenda for their own learning. Bruner likened the "social assistance to learning" to the interpersonal interaction in Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development".

In considering the theme of interactivity in the work of Vygotsky, Piaget and Bruner, this section has been admittedly very brief. It has served merely to highlight major conceptual positions on interaction in learning, as they relate, in this case, to learning to write. There are of course problems in reconciling the different stances adopted and several unanswered questions remain. For example, how does input (in terms of "talking about writing") become intake (in terms of the skills acquired)? Or, what is the role of affect (or culture, for that matter) in writing-as-cognition? Rather than reconcile these sometimes incompatible positions, this paper has regarded them simply as lenses, highlighting different facets of interactivity and collaboration in learning to write. In considering the use of writing conferences and dialogue journals in the next two sections, we attempt to provide some flesh and sinew to what has so far been a skeletal consideration of the place of interpersonal and intrapersonal interaction in learning.

II. Writing Conferences

The writing conference is simply a face-to-face discussion of a text between its author and one or more readers. As a classroom technique, the writing conference has risen into prominence with Donald Graves' (1977) seminal study of children's development as writers at the primary level, where Graves actually interviewed young writers about decisions they made in constructing their texts. Graves (1977) held that the interactive experience with one or more readers actually helped the young writers in his study to reflect on their own writing processes, leading them eventually to purposefully pursue writing for their own ends.

Writing conferences may be used both (1) as a pre-writing activity or (2) as a during-writing or post-writing activity, as a means to get a writer to reflect on an initial draft with a view to redrafting or fine tuning it. We shall consider each of these uses of the writing conference in turn:

(a) As a Pre-writing Activity

As a pre-writing activity the writing conference is a good motivator for writing and has the potential to generate "exploratory talk", providing an opportunity for the would-be writer to talk around a topic or argument until he or she "discovers" a plot or a thesis. In doing so the conference helps the writer identify a purpose or goal for writing. It can also, as a "scaffolding" activity in Bruner's terms, provide an opportunity for the writer to articulate a position and have confidence with it, before eventually committing that position to paper.

At the pre-writing stage also, the conference could be an excellent means of looking at previous writing as a spring-board for new writing, especially when the reason for using it crops up naturally in the course of exploring possible topics for writing. The example cited below, quoted from Simmons (1982) serves to convey a sense of the "flavour" of one such exploratory "conference":

T: Having trouble finding a subject?

S: I just can't think of anything to write about.

T: You wrote lots of good pieces last year.

S: In the eighth grade? I wrote a lot, but I don't think they were so great.

T: Didn't you like any of your pieces?

S: Sure. The ladybug story. But I have already written about that.

T: I remember that one. You found a ladybug in your yogurt!

S: All the kids liked that. That was my best.

T: Do you still have a copy?

S: At home. Why?

T: Why don't you bring it in and rewrite it. You know much more about writing now.

I am particularly struck by the conversational nature of the conference. Sowers (1982) calls it a "workmanlike conversation about writing ... not an interrogation". Significantly absent is the three-part Initiation-Response-Evaluation structure (Mehan, 1979; Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975) which characterizes much formal classroom discourse. In the above episode, Simmons who observed this conference noted that the above student brought the piece of writing to class and decided that there were several changes he could make. "He ended up using the piece as a first draft of a very successful ninth-grade composition" (p.61). The writing conference thus has the potential of exploring a repertoire of resources writers can draw on, in their environments, from their previous experiences and from their previous writing.

(b) As a During writing or Post writing Activity.

The non-interrogative, "workmanlike", conversational quality of the writing conference, which came across so clearly in the protocol cited in the prewriting conference above, is also an essential ingredient to the success of during-writing conferences. Drawing on ethnographic observations of writing conferences, Susan Sowers (1982) described certain types of responses which teachers could provide in writing conferences. She labeled these REFLECT, EXPAND and SELECT. Sowers, herself, observes that "these three kinds of responses to writing ... do not guarantee that children will see their writing through our [i.e. the teacher's] eyes, but they may help us see children's writing through the child's eyes" (p.76). Of course, more important than that, the child himself or herself comes to see his or her writing through "new eyes", because the writing conference provides a useful

mirror on his or her own writing processes and products. We shall briefly consider the three types of responses to student-writing.

(i) REFLECT

When the teacher reflects on the child's writing, she literally mirrors the text, by summarizing, paraphrasing or restating it. In presenting the author with an alternative "reflecting template" on which to "see" his or her text, the teacher allows the author a chance to "compare the product with the experience that launched it". (Sowers, 1982: 77). Another kind of reflecting also goes on at the conference: not only does the teacher reflect on what is in the writing, but he or she also encourages the writer to reflect on the experience itself. To put it differently, in providing a template on which the writer reflects (1) on the text and (2) on the experience that produced the text, the writing conference allows the writer to use his intuition and experience of the world to discern whether in fact a tension exists between his or her 'reflected' experience and the 'reflected' text. With the perception of these inherent tensions in a text, the groundwork is set for expansion of the text.

(ii) EXPAND

Beginning with the writer's reflections on a text, the writing conference can often help writers to expand on the draft. In this instance, the writers are led to talk around their texts, to provide further details which the readers feel are helpful towards making the text either more cohesive or more easily comprehensible. An example from an actual writing conference (Sowers, 1982) would be helpful to illustrate this function of conferencing and hence of "thinking" about writing. In this example, a first-grade student (Toni) brought her composition to the teacher and read it aloud:

All About My Dream

I had a dream.
It was a monster that was going to kill me.
I had to go through a lot of grass.
I went on a cliff.
I was in the water.
I was still in the water.

Susan Sowers (1982) describes what transpired at the writing conference

First (the teacher] paraphrased the writing: "You had a dream that a monster was chasing you. It chased you through some grass, and then you jumped off a cliff into some water. But did the monster get you? I need to know what happened"...

"I didn't want to get out of the water because the monster doesn't like water", Toni explained. She had no difficulty replying to what [the teacher asked] because it was part of her own experience and a subject she chose.

"Where could you put that?" [the teacher] asked. She helped Toni attend to the revision by dividing the problem into two parts-first, what to say and second, where to add it.

"Right here", said Toni, pointing to the space [in her composition]... Toni made the revision and read "I was safe in the water. The monster doesn't like it because he's half cat.

"He's half cat? How would I know that? [The teacher] nudged Toni again. You better tell it to me. Boy, Toni, you keep telling me more stuff!"

Toni added the newest information, this time finding space on the page without assistance, and read again. " 'I was still in the water. I was safe in the water. The monster doesn't like water because the monster is half cat'. Ooops, I forgot a period". She added her only period on the page at the end of the last sentence.

I feel much better now," [the teacher] said. Now I know you turned out safe. When you wrote the first time, I had no idea".

The above protocols are quoted at length here because they brilliantly capture a feel for the writing conference, showing the teacher skillfully yet ever so gently leading the student on to reflect and expand on her text. "The teacher's tone is respectful yet not overly solicitous, an expression of confidence that inadequate writing could be made adequate and good writing could be made better" (Sowers, 1984:8).

(iii) SELECT

The third response-type involves selection and focusing, i.e. the discussant helps the writer to select the parts of the text which should be the center of attention, while other parts can be either peripheralized or even totally ignored. The SELECT function of oral discourse in the writing conference helps the writer discern a perspective in his or her writing. In this regard, Sowers cites the case of a young writer, Hilary, who hesitated writing about her doll collection because she believed that she would have to write about every doll to do a good job. Hilary had to learn to select one or more of her favourites and focus attention on them. In retrospect then, each of the three response types, have underlying each of them the following implicit questions:

REFLECT *What is it really like?*

EXPAND *What else is important to add?*

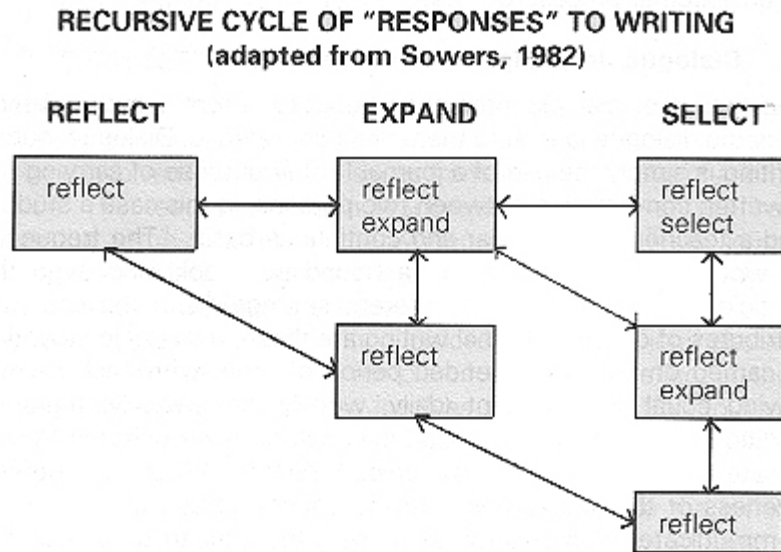
SELECT *What is most important?*

The three broad questions are seen as elements in a recursive cycle of responses to a text, leading the writer at each step to reflect, expand and select intermittently and interchangeably. The figure below shows how these recursive options may be realized in a writing conference. The arrows indicate possible directions in the next functional step in thinking about the text.

I am certainly not suggesting that the REFLECT, EXPAND and SELECT functions of talking (and hence, thinking about and interacting with) a text are a closed list of ways of functionally thinking about a text. But they are nevertheless useful in conceptually organizing and patterning one's cognitive responses to writing.

All this leads us neatly back to Vygotsky: the interactive "social" discourse on a text at the level of "proximal development" which

Figure 1



writing conferences invariably engender are crucial in helping young writers themselves internalize ways of thinking about writing.

Graves illustrates this critical movement towards internalization of "writing-conference talk" in a conversation with a young writer, Hilary. Asked what she was doing when she read her draft, Hilary replied, "I am having an individual conference-with myself".

Sowers (1984) who was present at this interview recounts:

Asked again what she did in her solitary conference, she said she read her composition again and thought of the questions that her peers would ask about it. She gave an example she anticipated about one page of her [composition] book, "ON THE FARM": "Your horse's name is Misty. Well, do you ride it or feed it or what?" So I'm going to put, "I ride her every day unless it is raining".

Hilary's response shows that she internalized conference-type dialogue to help her regulate her revision process.

In writing conferences, teacher-pupil interactions were a "scaffold" to encourage similar pupil-pupil interactions on a text, to appreciate, diagnose or offer remedies to peer-writers. Eventually, the student-writers themselves internalized this "reflective stance towards writing" and asked themselves the questions that they would anticipate from their readers. All this does indeed bring us one full circle, as the writing conference allows for the internalization of an external process of dialogue.

III. Dialogue Journals

The theme of dialogic interaction between a writer and audience links the dialogue journal to the writing conference. Dialogue journal writing is simply the use of a journal for the purpose of carrying out a written conversation between two persons, in this case a student and a teacher, on a regular and continuous basis. "The frequency of writing, the external form (a bound notebook) and

even the participants may all vary in different settings. [But] the essential attributes of dialogue journal writing are these: a dialogue in writing is carried on over an extended period of time, with each partner having equal and frequent (daily, weekly, semiweekly) turns. In addition to its interactive, continuous nature, each writer is free to initiate a conversation on any topic (Staton, 1988:4). The effectiveness of the journal arises in the conscious use of writing "to communicate, with two minds coming together to think together about a topic at hand". This section shall focus on two aspects of dialogue journal interaction: the provision of functional contexts for writing, and the cognitive demands on dialogue.

(i) FUNCTIONAL CONTEXTS FOR WRITING

In providing a natural context for writing, the dialogue journal by its very nature allows the writer to become more sensitive to or aware of the contextual constraints and influences on his or her audience. It gives to literacy acquisition the features of informal and functional interaction of a child's oral language development. With writing flowing back and forth between writer and reader as they seek to negotiate meaning and establish frames of reference, and with the reader and writer alternating roles frequently, dialogue journal writing is a form of written discourse that perhaps comes closest to approximating the qualities of spoken discourse in writing.

As Staton (1988) sees it:

"There [is] a functional relationship between writer and audience, and the audience must interact or respond to the message and its purpose in some direct and concrete way. These real-life conditions or contextual factors allow beginning writers to draw on their communicative competence in oral language. Only after much experience in such functional interactive self-directed writing should young writers be asked to "imagine" an unknown audience and an unfamiliar communicative situation." (Staton, 1988:316)

(ii) THE COGNITIVE DEMANDS OF DIALOGUE

The dialogue journal by its very responsive nature creates cognitive demands on the student to elaborate his or her own thinking to become involved in examining issues from the perspective of another person. The teacher's written responses to journal entries here serve the same function of the writing conference. Thus, journal writing creates conditions for the elaboration of one's thinking, allowing for the "deliberate structuring of the web of meaning", as Vygotsky (1962) saw the writing process. Dialogue journals, like writing conferences, provide a template for writers to reflect on their writing. Because this discourse involves a continual effort to negotiate streams of experience in symbolic form, students are "placed in a position of considering [their] daily meaning and (their) propositions in order to continue the communication". Like the writing conference also, dialogue journals call for the use of intellectual processes which are basic prerequisites to effective writing: topic focus, elaboration and a sense of audience.

However, unlike the talk that surrounds the writing conference, the responses to writing in the dialogue journal are on permanent record, thereby allowing the student to step back into the "past" to introspect on the different strands of language and thought that were steadily woven into meaningful discourse between a writer and his audience.

IV. CONCLUSION

My thesis has been that writing is very much an interactive enterprise. Drawing from views on interactivity in learning from Vygotsky, Piaget and Bruner, we have established that collaboration is a crucial and essential part of learning to write.

To return to the quote by Harold Rosen at the start of this paper, we recognise that part of the problem of learning to write is that the writer is, because of the nature of his or her craft, distanced from the audience because he or she is "robbed" of gesture and other paralinguistic and contextual cues to meaning construction. In view of this he has to anticipate reader-response before hand, i.e. even before the text reaches his audience. In view of this inherent "problem of distance" in writing, this paper has made a case for the use of writing conferences and dialogue journals, as pedagogical devices or activities, to allow the would-be writer to "construct for himself" a conceptual framework to cope with and anticipate reader responses. These two activities are themselves interactive, and allow for smoother and more effective interaction between a writer and his or her audience.

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