

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN STUDENTS HAVE A REAL AUDIENCE?

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Five minutes after the forty-six second-graders arrived, I questioned my sanity for having planned such a project. I ran around my school cafeteria trying to create order out of chaos, pinning on acorn names tags as I went, shouting to my students to get their partners and sit down. "No," I said, "cookies and juice are later," to the child who clutched my blazer from behind. Finally everyone was seated and reading. I had a chance to ask myself the same question I had asked myself several months ago: What happens when students write to a real audience? This was the question I was interested in exploring as I planned a children's literature project for two of my eighth grade classes. In order to provide a real audience for my students, I arranged to work with two second grade teachers and their classes in a nearby elementary school. My plan incorporated a letter writing exchange, followed by a visit to the elementary school for the reading of a draft copy of the forty-six stories written by the eighth graders. The job of the second grade partners was an important one: the children provided ideas for plot, and, after the reading of an initial draft, helped the eighth graders revise. Both students worked toward a final copy which would be shared again during another visit. As we worked through this project, my students and I discovered much more than I expected.

The letter exchange, the first communication between assigned partners, was a difficult task for eighth graders. The basic information they needed was guidance about what kinds of stories second graders liked. The problem was how to best get the information. The class brainstormed ideas. Since second graders do not

read cursive writing, the information had to be printed. Class members agreed to use short sentences with understandable vocabulary. After students asked specific questions, they told the partners something about themselves, what they looked like, and some of their hobbies. Students also told the second graders that they were going to write a book and needed their help.

With this initial effort, students immediately became aware of audience. Jennie admitted that it was difficult to write this letter, much more difficult than she had imagined. She shared her concern with the class the next day, having worked on her letter at home the night before: "I was afraid my partner wouldn't understand what I wanted to say. The vocabulary was the hardest part." Ann voiced the same concern and offered an example of what she meant: "I wanted to say something, I had trouble, for example, with the word *appreciate*. I thought a second grader would have trouble with that word. I had to think of a simpler way to say what I wanted to say." At this point in the class discussion, another class member suggested simply saying, "Thank you for your help."

The revision process for these letters was extensive. Because the answers to the letters would provide information for possible stories, students were keenly aware of the importance of being understood. Scooter needed answers to his questions because he had asked his partner if he liked "long or short stories, scary stories, stories with animals or people, rhyming stories or stories with lots of pictures." Scooter told his seven-year-old partner Jason, "Your answers to these questions will help me write my story."

While the class members waited for answers to their letters, they began to peruse popular children's books to pinpoint common qualities. This modeling of stories proved to be a successful strategy. Students remembered many of their favorite books and brought them in from home, I borrowed books and filmstrips from the elementary librarian, and the reading resource teacher in our school read aloud to everyone's delight Margaret Wise Brown's *Good Night Moon* (1947). Other authors included Shel Silverstein, Dr. Seuss, Janice and Stan Berenstain, Gene Zion, and Judith Viorst. Working in small groups, students presented what they had found to the entire class. Almost every group agreed that illustrations were important in a book for a child and that they should be imaginative and colorful. Students reported that many of the books rhymed, such as *The Drummer Boy of Vincen-*

nes and *Hugh Harold*. Another common quality noted was that many words or ideas were repeated in children's books. Also, many of the books had animals that acted like humans, such as the Berenstain series. Many of the books focused on language being misunderstood. Of course, *Amelia Bedelia* was the students' favorite example of this type.

During this process of exploring children's literature, students chose books to read aloud to the class. After reading, the students talked about how the book was written, discussing its theme. Students discovered that many books are written about everyday events or fears such as Judith Viorst's *My Mama Says. . . There Aren't Any Zombies, Ghosts, Vampires, Creatures, Demons, Monsters, Fiends, Goblins, or Things*. They began building confidence, believing that they could succeed in writing a book for a child.

Finally, the letters arrived from the second grade partners, delivered in a large package by the school's inter-school mail service. There was great excitement in the class as the letters were distributed. After reading them individually, students shared them with the total class. Nathan said his partner "Sounds just like me!" Elgin had a problem. His partner mentioned a book called *The Just Right Family*. Elgin was concerned, "I've never read it, but I will." Amy was surprised "He likes to draw. I didn't think second graders would like to draw." Michelle and her partner learned that they shared the same hobby: collecting stickers. The letter that reminded us the most of the age of the second graders was from Kristen's partner who said that she had just lost two teeth. Many of the children included in their letters the number of teeth they had lost.

After the initial class sharing, I asked my students to write about receiving the letters. What had changed? Had the partner become more real? The students' writing was honest. Almost all felt a tremendous responsibility to the partner. Kari said it best in her writing: "I love my letter from my pal. Now he is a person instead of just a name. It's very exciting to get a letter from a little person."

Linus was able to decide what the content of his book would be after reading his letter: "I think that I am going to write a riddle book for him because he seems to like riddles." Sandi was also able to make a decision on content: "I think since he likes dinosaur stories and scary stories, I'm going to mix them together to form

a sort of dinosaur family who gets in a scary situation.” Sandi was even able to incorporate her partner’s favorite colors into her book: “Since his favorite colors are red and blue, I think that I’ll make the cover and base the pictures in the book on blue and red. It should be easy, considering it’s a dinosaur book.”

The letters also contributed to the writer’s self confidence. William was a little worried before receiving his letter; however, he stated after receiving it, “Thanks to the letter I feel good inside, really happy. Finally I have someone who likes and appreciates my jokes. Already I can picture him in my mind. I will try to write him my best story ever.”

After receiving his letter, Nathan was ready to begin making decisions about the story he would write: “My story should be a little scary with a happy ending. I don’t think I should write a mystery, although I might. I’m thinking of putting my partner in my story as a character. I’ll call him Inspector Smart. I’ll try to rhyme the sentences.”

For the next several days, the classroom became a writing workshop with writing, sharing, problem solving, and editing. For two days, we sat in a circle, listening to stories, giving suggestions for revision. Students could read even if they had not finished their stories. They could ask other students for advice about alternative endings or situations in the plot. They also told each other what was confusing in the story.

Finally, with stories in hand, my students boarded the bus for the trip to the elementary school. The second grade partners had made nametags which the eighth graders wore. On entering the second grade pod, I was immediately struck by the fact that seven-year-olds are very small; however, what they lacked in size was made up for in enthusiasm. After the partners found each other, they drifted to a quiet place for reading and discussing the story. Specific questions had been prepared by the students. They had decided together the content and number of questions to be asked, being careful not to overwhelm the audience. After the story was read aloud, the eighth grade writer asked the partner these questions:

- What did you like most in the story?
- Did you understand the story?
- What could you suggest as a title for the story?

Andy’s partner helped him choose the title “Mystery of the Missing Dragon.” Chris felt his partner understood the moral of his

story, which was that if someone is mean, maybe it's because he needs a friend, because the child told him about some people that were like that.

Some students discovered some major problems in their stories. Wendy said, "After I read my story, I asked my partner the questions. No wonder she didn't seem interested. She didn't understand the whole meaning of the story! I read out some of the more difficult words, and she said she didn't know them either." When Amy's partner admitted he didn't like the ending of her story, together they wrote, as Amy describes, "a new and better ending for it."

There were frustrations. For example, William's partner was absent from school on the day of our visit. He admitted, "My person didn't show up! The girl I read it to was nice, but she didn't understand the story at all, she didn't understand my jokes, she didn't talk too much, and she didn't seem too excited. I wish my partner had been there." We were able to leave a copy of the story behind; nevertheless, William was very disappointed.

Aaron's partner was there, but she was very shy and did not talk. Aaron was outraged, "This whole thing was crazy. The girl who was my partner wouldn't talk. I read her my story, but she wouldn't answer my questions. Also, she just fiddled around, kept looking at other people, and, I don't even think, listened. In a way that annoys me because I worked hard on that story for nothing. It's funny because in her letter she didn't seem like that at all." Despite his initial disappointment, Aaron later wrote, "I learned that maybe my book was a little too long and grown-up for a seven-year-old. I learned, though, that there is a good listening audience among the younger kids, and I think they appreciate our work."

During the visit to the elementary school, my students became aware, sometimes painfully, of audience. But, after the visit, the majority of students were ready to revise and eager to do so. They had become real writers with a responsibility to a real audience.

The next stage in the writing process involved revising the text of the story and planning the artistic layout for the book. An art teacher gave a special presentation on graphics, illustrations, and the use of color. Students worked hard to meet a deadline, for the second meeting between writer and audience would be held within a week. We had invited the second grade classes to our school for a final reading and book publishing party.

The day the second graders arrived was an exciting one for us all. They marched into the school cafeteria ready to see their partners again, eager to hear the stories they had helped revise. As I walked around the room, I heard stories about unicorns, detectives, and animals; I observed Aaron's partner trying to read the story by himself after asking Aaron to help him with the "hard" words. I heard them discussing their prepared questions:

- Which illustrations do you like most?
- How is this draft different from the first one?
- What do you like most about my story?
- Which character do you like most?

Many of the students remarked that their partners answered the questions even better during this second reading.

As the second-graders lined up to board the bus, my students and I sat down with pencil and paper. I wanted to jot down my impressions, and I had a question for them: How did having a child as your audience influence your writing? Michelle said, "Having the second grader as an audience affected my writing a lot. I felt encouraged to write and illustrate, and Mark really gave me some useful information. When I first began, I was totally blank. I had no idea what I was going to write about. The letter he wrote gave me not only a subject, but an instant plot appeared in my mind. My mind overflowed with ideas for dinosaur stories."

At the end of this project, my question had been answered. A real audience makes an enormous difference to a writer, not just as a listener, but as a provider of ideas, as an encourager, as a force that made revision more probable. Were the work and chaos worth it? Yes. My students are writers with a real audience just waiting for the next letter. I wonder what we'll write next. The audience waits.

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