

# Reading and Writing "Hypertextually": Children's Literature, Technology, and Early Writing Instruction

DAWNE D. HAMMERBERG

*Dawnene Hammerberg juxtaposes contemporary children's literature with contemporary writing instruction for the purpose of finding places where early elementary writing experiences can be updated to include hypertextual elements, multiple perspectives, and meaning beyond words.*

On the cover page of the children's book *Black and White* (Macaulay, 1990), the title is swiped in blues and greens, and written in letters that are anything but block and stable, thus sending a message beyond the words that all is not black and white. In Jules Feiffer's (1997) book *Meanwhile*, the size and placement of the words on the page contain meaning beyond the words themselves, such as whether certain words are yelled, through graphic representation in comic-book form. No need for quotation marks here, nor the convention of explaining who yelled after the quote. The reader acts as one who makes meaning out of the visual design of the words. In *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* (Scieszka & Smith, 1992), half of the dedication page is written in huge block letters and the whole text has been set upside down, with a note, right side up saying:

I know. I know. The page is upside down. I meant to do that.  
Who ever looks at that dedication stuff anyhow? If you really  
want to read it—you can always stand on your head. (p. 1)

Children's literature today embodies cues for reading that extend beyond the letters and words on the page, demanding interpretation and interaction with the text beyond the decoding of print. The computerization of type design and the photomechanical printing technologies available today make it easier for words to look like anything, appearing anywhere on the page in any color, size, or shape. Graphics add to the meaning or even are the meaning, causing readers to focus on symbols and signs and visual designs, cues often unrelated to the alphabetic writing system of language placed in print.<sup>1</sup> In a world influenced by changing forms of communication, information, and mass media, children encounter various modes of representation as well as new ways of reading, interpreting, interacting, and thinking: on their Pokémon cards, through their computerized games, in their videos and TV shows, and in their children's literature. Children interact and connect with these various modes of representation (e.g., print, video, audio, and graphic images) in multimodal ways: visual and verbal, spoken and written, narrative and display (see Kress, 1998). While traditional forms of printed text remain useful, new technologies make it possible to combine textual, visual, and verbal elements into new modes of communication that

207

rival the printed word. For example, Kress (1998) notes that the "reliance on the medium of writing for communication and representation . . . has produced the present situation of information overload" (p. 55), and that "the visual may be more useful for transmitting large amounts of certain kinds of information" (p. 55). In addition, "interactive" and "nonlinear" characteristics of new kinds of texts extend the ways in which meaning might be made and thought might be represented. These (and other) changes expand and challenge notions of representation and interpretation commonly associated with traditional printed texts. Contemporary children's literature is undergoing such notable changes in formats, perspectives, and boundaries (see, e.g., The Center for the Study of Children's Literature, 1999; Dresang, 1999). This article begins by exploring the graphical, hypertextual, interactive elements of children's literature, and then compares those elements to the characteristics of writing taught in early elementary school writing instruction. Here, we can explore the forms, perspectives, characterizations, and subject matters being modeled through the teaching methods and through interactive writing (e.g., Button, Johnson, & Furgerson, 1996; Dorn, French, & Jones, 1998; McCarrier, Pinnell, & Fountas, 2000). There are mismatches between the ways in which children are taught to write and the materials they are currently reading. The purpose of this exploration is to find the places where contemporary writing instruction can be updated to include elements of hypertextual reading, meaning beyond printed words, multiple perspectives, and complexities of plot. In this exploration, we might begin to consider ways to extend the imaginative ranges of young students and we might begin to imagine possible changes to the ways we think about early elementary writing instruction.

## CONTEMPORARY CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Dresang (1999), in her book *Radical Change*, explores the ways in which contemporary children's literature is keeping in step with changing terrains of communication and representation. She identifies, outlines, and celebrates these changes in relation to the "digital age," which she describes as "the societal landscape that has gradually emerged as computers have become more commonplace and as the Internet has become a locale where children can learn and play" (p. 6).

Dresang's (1999) work is key when it comes to noting the variety of changes occurring in children's literature today. She introduces a framework for registering graphical and digital design elements found in books for children as well as a framework for recognizing shifts in the kinds of perspectives, characterization, and subject matter being represented in books today. Drawing on her work, I first share examples of children's literature that contain changing forms, "hypertextual" elements, meaning beyond words, multiple perspectives, and complex themes.

## CHANGING TEXTUAL FORMS AND HANDHELD HYPERTEXT

Beyond the cover page of Macaulay's (1990) *Black and White*, with its title swiped in blues and greens, the book contains four stories occurring on the page all at once, but maybe not in "time" all at once. A "warning" on the title page reads: "This book appears to contain a number of stories that do not necessarily occur at the same time. Then again, it may contain only one story. In any event, careful inspection of both words and pictures is recommended" (p. 1). The reader (not the author) decides how to proceed and where to focus. Readers can choose to follow one story through the whole book, look at the stories simultaneously, compare similar images in all stories, compare continuities among stories, or many (and more) combinations in between.

Contemporary children's literature is often organized in nonlinear or nonsequential ways. Sometimes this is because the plot is presented (using traditional, linear sentences) in nonsequential, time-slipping, timeframes (e.g., Sachar's, 1998, book entitled *Holes*). Other times, it is because the text offers multiple ways to read the same book, various texts and textual imageries on which to focus, or many possible ways to proceed (e.g., Macaulay's, 1990, *Black and White*). In addition, many new books for children present information in "bytes," such as Beeler's (1998) *Throw Your Tooth on the Roof: Tooth Traditions from Around the World*, or the Cole and Degan (1992, 1997) *Magic School Bus* series.

Dresang (1999) refers to the type of children's literature that can be read in nonlinear, nonsequential ways through reader choice as "handheld hypertext." Like its computer counterpart found on CD-ROMs word processing programs or websites, handheld hypertext contains links to other meanings, various pathways to follow, or parallel displays of information. The difference is that the pathways and parallel displays are contained within a book with covers and pages. Unlike its computer counterpart, handheld hypertext has no "buttons" to click. Instead, the reader "moves" around in the text by focusing differently on different textual aspects, or by physically turning the page or moving the whole book around.<sup>2</sup>

Footnotes and endnotes are forms of hypertext in that a reader can find out more about the text she or he is reading by making a choice to go to the notes. However, contemporary children's literature offers the reader more choices of what to read (and when) than footnotes and endnotes do in traditional texts. This is because the organization of the images and text on the page are often laid out side by side, on top of each other, or underneath each other, often with several stories or plot lines taking place at once. This makes it possible for readers to rely on their own perspectives and to interact with the story as it unfolds in multiple ways.

### Graphics, Imagery, and Meaning Beyond Words

In addition, the relationships between images and text in children's literature provide a textual context in which readers must

notice more than the printed word (Dresang, 1999, pp. 87–88; Nodelman, 1988). Traditionally, pictures and illustrations work with printed words by way of agreement, where the words and the pictures explain each other. But they can also contradict each other, as in *The Stinky Cheese Man* (Scieszka & Smith, 1992), where on the book jacket, Jon Scieszka's bio is accompanied by a picture of George Washington, while a picture of "Honest Lane Smith," the illustrator, looks like Abraham Lincoln. The contradiction between texts and pictures requires a smart sense of irony, and a creative sense of humor that is often not addressed in early writing instruction as students are taught the technicalities of placing letters on a page.

### The relationship between images and printed text can also be one of synergy.

In texts and literature today, images and printed words can also expand each other's meaning. Kress (1998), for example, illustrates a shift in the relationship between images and printed words through an analysis of science textbooks, one from 1936, and the other from 1988. In the 1936 textbook, "language has the role . . . of expressing all the essential information, [whereas] images are assumed to have the function of 'illustration'" (Kress, 1998, p. 62). In the 1988 textbook, on the other hand, the essential meaning is carried in the images, as in Kress' example of the text saying "Here is a simple circuit," while the image carries the information of what the circuit looks like, is, and does (p. 64).<sup>3</sup> In this extension mode, words and images operate differently, each carrying a different meaning through different modes of expression.

The relationship between images and printed text can also be one of synergy (Dresang, 1999, pp. 87–92) where the message must be read through images-as-text in ways that make it difficult to say where meaning lies, in the words or in the images. Dresang (1999) describes synergy this way: "In the most radical form of synergy, words and pictures are so much a part of one another that it is almost impossible to say which is which" (p. 88). "Text" becomes a conglomeration of both. Words appear *in* pictures and *over* pictures in ways that require a nonliteral reading of the printed text, for to only read the words for their literal meaning would be to escape with no meaning whatsoever.

One example of this is a photo of an attorney in Walter and Roedelein's (1998) *Making Up Megaboy*, on whose face is superimposed a series of printed sentences, not in lines but contoured to the face, that sort of ramble in pointless concern over a serious juvenile crime:

Mr. Jones does not realize the seriousness of Robbie's situation. His son committed a capital crime, a felony, to which there was a witness and to which he has confessed. There are no facts in dispute about his actions. It is just fortunate that

he hadn't turned fourteen; I don't think I could have prevented his being tried as an adult if he had been a year older. I think I might have been more effective in securing an alternative treatment facility for Robbie if his father had been cooperative with the social workers and probation officers who were investigating his case. We were unable to establish any motive for the crime. To this day, I don't know why Robbie Jones killed Jae Lin Koh. I wonder if Robbie even knows why he did it. He'll have a lot of time to think about it. He won't be released until he is twenty-five. (p. 57)

There is "noise" in the graphic, layered words contoured on a face, but the words mean nothing compared to the synergy between photo and text, which says how nobody can explain why, how nobody knows why, how in the end there is no answer. The words mean nothing because they babble with no new information: "this attorney . . . talks a lot but knows nothing" (Dresang, 1999, p. 88). It's easy to not "listen" to the words, since they are pointless in themselves. All the words end up meaning nothing in a way that could never be captured by a literal comprehension test or a literal interpretation of the sign systems of print. The text block I have presented in this piece (this one right here that you're holding) does nothing to describe the overall composition that exists in the book: the distanced face on which the words are written, and the required distanced reading.

### Multiple Perspectives, Characterization, and Subject Matter

Walter and Roedelein's (1998) book *Making Up Megaboy*, then, has several layers of truth to it, but in the end, no truth at all. Because of and despite the 16 voices in this book, there are at the same time many ways and no ways of determining why juvenile crimes in general and murders such as this one happen. Possible interpretations necessarily involve multiple perspectives, simply because the book itself involves multiple perspectives on the same situation.

The same can be said of Fleischman's (1997) *Seedfolks*, one story told by 13 voices about a vacant lot in Cleveland. In books with multiple perspectives that can be read from multiple vantage points, there may not be a final resolution or singular answer, since even the author may not know for sure. The author functions within and behind a technology of production that brings us no singular author, making meaning and perspective open and complicated, neither black nor white, not necessarily innocent, but often not guilty. Far from being stuck in a first-person narrative, much of today's children's literature takes perspectives that are open to chaos and uncertainty, able to be read from multiple vantage points.

Beyond this, the "I" voices of novels written in the first person often demonstrate complexity of character, as opposed to characters who function from a single, never-changing perspective. For example, Cisneros' (1984) *The House on Mango Street*, takes on a perspective and voice that is complex and authentic. Esperanza Cordero, a young Latina growing up in the

Latino section of Chicago and the main "I" character of Cisneros' novel, speaks in vignettes, some angry, some happy, some harsh, some fun—all are powerful. Each vignette can stand on its own, but taken together, they comprise a whole that is not necessarily linear, not necessarily sequential, not necessarily only about inner resiliency, not necessarily only about low expectations, not necessarily only about violence, not necessarily only about hope. Uncertainty is not tamed so that a story may be produced with a final resolution, or even a final theme. Esperanza speaks for herself, and it is up to readers to come to conclusions about her.

210

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that childhood is not always happy.**

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To use complex characters and situations in books for children acknowledges that children draw upon their own experiential, developmental, social, and cultural perspectives (Beach, 1993) while reading. In fact, to identify with complex characters requires a drawing on experience and an interaction with the text on several levels, a kind of "aesthetic reading" (Rosenblatt, 1993), where the role of the reader is to bring their own perspectives as opposed to reading for information.

For example, the main character of Fenner's (1995) *Yolanda's Genius* schemes her way through discrimination in order to get the genius of her brother's musical talent recognized. Identification with Yolanda can occur on many levels (being a sister, being a brother, being a genius, being discriminated against), but the sharing in emotions and conflicts can't be gained by blankly staring at the words and slating them from a position of indifference. The main character of Slepian's (1980) *The Alfred Summer*, Lester, has cerebral palsy, but the reader does not need to memorize information about the disease to grasp how the physical challenge is secondary to the mental challenge of self-doubt. The minds and concerns of the complex characters in today's children's literature can hardly be described as "blank slates," and neither can the minds and concerns of today's young reader. In addition, many contemporary authors are dealing with "goodness" and "badness," character and resolution, choices and options, in ways that do not romanticize ideas of childhood, but instead, produce textual contexts in which children are neither wild things nor angels (Nodelman, 1996), perhaps devilish with good intentions (e.g., *Babbit*, 1974, 1987; Meddaugh, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1998).

Functioning outside of an 18th century notion that childhood is an innocent time, many contemporary authors acknowledge that childhood is not always happy, children are not always innocent, adults are not always trustworthy. The possible themes, settings, plots, and subject matters of contemporary children's literature reflect the responsibilities, dilemmas, and survival skills of being a child today. Eve

Bunting's (1994) *Smoky Night*, for example, is a children's book about the Los Angeles riots. In this book, as in others, the child protagonist is seen as capable of making decisions based on different contextual experiences of right and wrong.

Signs within the text, then—the textual form, the imagery and graphics, the multiple perspectives, the meaning beyond denotation—can be seen as embodying multiple cues for how meaning is to be found, interpreted, and read. The genre of children's literature repositions the reader today as someone who does more than decode the words. The function of the author, too, is to construct relations between images and text, readers and perspectives, as a product of technological possibilities with graphics and textual contexts, but also as a product of different assumptions about the social compositions of the audience. Children are assumed to be capable of seeking connections (Dresang, 1999, p. xxiv), and this assumption is embodied in a technology of production that makes the relationship between images and texts, readers and writers, a complex set of connections.

Meanwhile, back at the school, children are taught how to represent their thoughts and experiences in writing. As teachers teach young children about the process of writing, the purpose of early writing instruction is to model and explain the strategies of constructing a text with specific characteristics that are often different from the textual elements discussed thus far. Writing instruction at the elementary school level may simply have different objectives, and therefore different objects in the making. However, there may be ways to rethink what we do and expand how we teach in light of the changes occurring around us.

### CONTEMPORARY EARLY WRITING INSTRUCTION

As a context for changing the ways we might think about early writing instruction, we can begin by analyzing a few approaches to the instruction of writing that are in use in elementary classrooms today. Two pedagogical approaches to early writing instruction are of particular interest: shared writing (e.g., Cunningham & Allington, 1999; Dorn, French, & Jones, 1998; McKenzie, 1986; Routman, 1994) and interactive writing (e.g., Button, Johnson, & Furgerson, 1996; McCarrier, Pinnell, & Fountas, 2000). Along with shared and interactive writing experiences, current research in writing instruction advocates the inclusion of two other types of writing experiences throughout the school day: guided writing or the writing workshop (e.g., Atwell, 1987, 1998; Calkins, 1983, 1994) and independent writing (e.g., Bissex, 1980; Clay, 1975; Dyson, 1982). However, shared and interactive writing have a particular impact in that these two approaches provide models of writing upon which students are to rely as they write independently or while conferencing with their peers and teachers.

Modeled writing is considered important, in general, because it gives students a chance to "see" how writers think. Modeled

writing focuses on specific steps in the writing process—prewriting, drafting, revising, editing—as whole-class texts are produced. This type of modeling serves as an illustration of how to think about what to write, how to actually start writing, how to choose information, where to look in the room for help (e.g., word walls for spelling), or how to revise and change things. In the act of modeling, teachers can choose which technicalities of writing to focus on: appropriate spelling, support of the main idea with good details, creating a voice befitting to the audience, choosing descriptive words carefully, learning how to use quotation marks, and so on. The modeling done in the classroom serves as a point of reference for guided writing conferences and as an archetype for independent work.

### Shared and Interactive Writing

Shared writing is a modeled writing strategy whereby the students, in a large group, listen to the teacher think out loud about the choices she or he is making during a daily writing time. The teacher, in front of the whole class, writes on a chart tablet or overhead projector so that everybody can see the demonstration of how writing works. This writing time begins with a prewriting plan, where information is gathered about a topic through discussion and possibly demonstrations of where to find sources or how to draw a plan. Sometimes, the teacher talks out loud while writing, asking students for suggestions, while, other times, the teacher guides the students to think about a shared or common experience, and the students give suggestions for what to write next as the story unfolds. If mistakes are made or things need to be crossed out, the teacher does this in front of everybody, providing reassurance that all writers make mistakes along the way. Through the constant verbalization of what the teacher is thinking as she or he writes, shared writing is a modeling of how to think like and be a writer.

Interactive writing, like shared writing, is also a teacher-led activity, but this time, the messages are written through the use of a "shared pen." In this "hands-on" demonstration of how writing works, students take part in coming up to the chart pad and writing individual words, singular letters, or punctuation marks of a text. Given teacher repetition of the text in the act of guiding the writer, the class has a sentence strip that everybody in the class can read because it's been repeated possibly 10 to 30 times as it was being written. Interactive writing is a technique for understanding the technicalities of getting every word down on the page, the technicalities of spelling and word work. This slow-motion interactive product is a model of how writing works that is effective because the students have experienced the thinking that takes place to make a spoken sentence become words on a page.

### The Form of Writing in Early Writing Instruction

In shared and interactive writing experiences, a particular form of writing is taught. Both teaching strategies, while different

in focus and method, move children toward an understanding of the form that writing takes. Young writers learn that writing in English goes from left to right and top to bottom, for example. The final product is written, by hand, on lines, with margins. The end product looks like a piece of writing and holds the author to a particular understanding of what writing "is." Content and style aside, the tools of writing in elementary classrooms (word processor, permanent black marker, permanent blue marker, erasable pens or chalk) still produce pieces of writing that look somewhat similar. There are margins, there are words, there are text blocks.

Even though the instructional focus of these writing lessons varies from day to day, the lessons themselves are embedded in and through the form. While the focus of interactive writing is meant to teach specific print-awareness concepts, the how-to-write writing strategies played out in the model (directional movement, one-to-one matching) reflect concepts about spatiality and form in the production of a written text. The model, as a form, reflects what the finished product should look like, even as young writers are learning about how to represent their larger ideas and the sounds of their words.

In shared writing as well, which Dorn, French, and Jones (1998) call "writing aloud," the main purpose is claimed to be "to demonstrate the importance of composing a meaningful, coherent message for a particular audience and a specific purpose" (p. 64; also see Routman, 1994), the end product achieved through shared and interactive writing is a text that has specific characteristics and embodies an expected form.

The layout is visual, something to be seen by all. The stories or sentences are linear, and the reader reads them linearly, line by line, as guided by the class and the teacher and the pointer pointing at words. So while interactive and shared writing experiences produce models through which many rules about writing may be taught, the instruction is taking place within a particular form. And this form reveals the techniques of young writers who are learning to function within it.

Compare this form of writing to the changing formats of children's texts. The size and placement of words on the pages of children's books (e.g., *Meanwhile*, Feiffer, 1997) contain meaning beyond the word as a function of visual design. The nonlinearity of handheld hypertext (e.g., *Black and White*, Macaulay, 1990) mocks the lines on a chart pad and calls for a different kind of reading. To write a word upside down during interactive writing means to have it covered by correction tape and rewritten right side up. To see words upside down in *The Stinky Cheese Man* (Scieszka & Smith, 1992) means to turn the book over, interact with the text, and laugh. Contemporary writing instruction, even when it is student directed and chosen, holds as its model a type of writing where the author functions primarily as someone who grasps the conventional concepts of letters, words, and punctuation, as she grasps the pencil to cram her beautiful, wonderful thoughts into ordered lines and paragraphs. These beautiful, wonderful thoughts have limited ways of being represented: it's a full

writing system, but it's not currently aimed at conceptual design and representation of meaning beyond denotation. Spatiality, size, graphics, images, and colors are certainly possible in classroom writing, but the modeling of writing that prioritizes instruction in words, letters, and sounds precludes instruction in the metalingual functioning of signs.

### **The Perspectives Represented in Early Writing Instruction**

Routman (1994) writes that "[i]n shared writing, the writing is a negotiated process with meanings, choices of words, and topics discussed and decided jointly by students and teachers" (p. 60). Yet, the end product, while constructed "jointly," appears written from a singular perspective (i.e., there are not multiple levels of texts and contradictory voices describing multiple perspectives).

Routman (1994) lists numerous examples of the end products that shared writing experience may produce (p. 60). Since many of these end products of shared writing experiences are about classroom events (class observations, shared experiences, news of the day) or other "factual" texts (class rules, reports, evaluations of books), the end product sticks to a singular topic with a singular-sounding voice. This can also lead to written pieces that are stuck in a first-person narrative style:

We have a rabbit in our classroom. (Shared writing example from Routman, 1994, p. 62)

One dark night I went walking by a pond. (Writing aloud example from Dorn, French, & Jones, 1998, p. 66)

The variety of responses from a large group of authors-in-training become negotiated into sentences and texts that, while presumably interesting and relevant to the students, represent a synthesized, conglomerated author that functions as a single voice out of many.

That the first-person voice (singular or plural) is the predominant model used in interactive and shared writing makes sense: we are writing about shared experiences. This successfully unites the "we" of the class with the "we" of the author-in-training, who is learning how to write in linear and coherent textual form. This joint and democratic "we" or "I" serves the function of a singular author, rhetorically with multiple perspectives, but realistically with the function of a single-voiced narrative. The model of sticking to the main text with appropriate English makes multiple voices with multiple perspectives muffled in the text. The model as a demonstration of textual production reveals how the whole-class author is to function as an "I" in elementary classrooms.

This technique of understanding writing serves as a model for future independent writing. So, although it is theoretically possible for the author to say whatever she or he wants to say when writing independently, the function of an author as a single voice with a coherent plan has already been set. And

while class books can be made that portray multiple perspectives on an issue (one voice per page, for example), shared writing, as a model, sets a different norm. Writing (or thinking) from multiple perspectives as a single author is a strategy left un-taught in shared and interactive writing activities at the same moment when multiple perspectives and thoughts are gathered on the carpet all together, side by side.

In children's literature, on the other hand, multiple stories sing and exist side by side, as readers are enabled to produce multiple meanings and envision multiple perspectives. Compare the multiple stories in *Black and White* (Macaulay, 1990) to the singular plot lines produced in elementary classrooms. Compare the multiple voices and stories in *Seedfolks* (Fleischman, 1997) to the ways in which multiple inputs from children become negotiated and filtered in the service of training students how to write organized pieces with singular voices and tidy plots. Multiple inputs are boiled down to linear, organized, and coherent paths in elementary models of how writing works.

### **The Taming of the Awkward in Early Writing Instruction**

The "author" (large-group and negotiated) of shared and interactive writing activities, while initially open to chaos and uncertainty, ends up taming uncertainty and awkwardness as a linear story or plan is produced. The author, for example, is not allowed to deviate from the purpose of the text. The teacher, supposedly acting as no more than "scribe," asks leading questions and helps students to focus. Routman (1994) advises:

The language we teachers use in the shared writing context is critical for genuine, participatory experience. For example, instead of saying, "I don't feel that sentence fits," I might say, "What do you think about . . . ? Does that fit?" to make the process more democratic. Or instead of saying, "Let's put this in dialogue," I might try, "What do you think about using dialogue here?" While teacher input is important, we don't want to take over. The teacher's voice should guide rather than dominate. (p. 60)

While guiding rather than dominating, however, the teacher's voice operates in the final production that is still manufactured through a technology that demands coherence of thought from a single perspective over "genuine, participatory experiences." Because shared writing is an instructional strategy, it is viewed as a way to model appropriate writing even as the teacher is pretending to be democratically scribing oral thoughts. The uncertainty and chaos of the group is tamed through the techniques that permit us to produce a coherent, meaningful text.

Compare this taming to the characteristics of contemporary children's literature that highlight not knowing (e.g., the lack of answers for why juvenile crimes happen in Walter &

Roeckelein's, 1998, *Making Up Megaboy*), or that confront chaos head on (e.g., the L.A. riots in Bunting's, 1994, *Smoky Night*). Note also that, in shared writing, the erasure of dialect and the "reworking" of any "awkward constructions that students may offer" (Cunningham & Allington, 1999, p. 89) involve a different kind of writing than Cisneros' (1984) authentic language in *The House on Mango Street*. As Esperanza speaks for herself in this book, there is some Spanish, some dialect, incomplete sentences, and no use of quotation marks despite the wealth of dialogue. Meanwhile, shared and interactive writing experiences are meant to "rework awkward constructions" in a large group setting, and it's unfortunate that a child's paper in school runs the risk of being red-marked due to authenticity of language or the lack of punctuation marks.

### **Boundaries of Subject Matter and Resolution in Early Writing Instruction**

Early writing instruction is also bound by particular social and political constraints about what can be said or written in the classroom. For the most part, the subject matter of the models written through shared and interactive writing is contained by shared and common experiences in the classroom: class observations, shared experiences, rules and charts, newsletters, curricular studies (Routman, 1994, p. 60). Narratives written aloud are personal, but harmless (if not wholesome): descriptions of people (relatives, neighbors, someone who bugs you); descriptions of places (the park, the zoo, your room); definitions of noble themes (love, learning, friendship, courage); "how-to" explanations (make a taco, care for a pet, impress a teacher). (Writing topic examples have been taken from Kemper, Nathan, & Sebranek, 1995, p. 29).

### **Variability and open-endedness occur daily in classroom conversations . . .**

The matter of how classroom discourse is articulated and transformed into writing reflects social and political values, but it also reflects a particular technique that transforms controversy into appropriate resolution. Possible writing topics, while seemingly boundless, are managed by a technology of production and a function for the author that define the boundaries and limits of educationally appropriate subject matter. It is not that controversial issues *can't* be written about or *aren't* written about in shared and interactive writing, it is more that the technique of filtering many voices into a planned and systematic product orders the multiple levels of meaning and chaos available in controversial themes.

Daily classroom controversy could be as "simple" as different versions of who spilled the milk at lunch or as "complex" as discussions of violence among children. But either

way and all ways, early writing instruction requires a specific, linear, coherent form (as a model), which governs order and detail in ways that make precision and closure more important than variability and open-endedness.

Variability and open-endedness occur daily in classroom conversations surrounding the writing that aims at closed precision. In the act of writing a simple closed sentence interactively, children think openly out loud: *Fish died and were made into sticks for lunch. My fish died last week. I've got a dog. You do not.* And then we learn to spell a nicer version of our shared conversation. *We had fish sticks for lunch.* Factual, to the point, and free from any of that messy controversy.

Denotation is valued over connotation as more variable, less-predeterminable sentences are carefully worked into phrases that are clear and concise, using precise words and details as a function of the author whose "main reason for writing is to create a story that others will enjoy" (Dorn, French, & Jones, 1998, p. 64). The models provided by shared and interactive writing, then, offer to authors norms of appropriate thinking that do not allow for too much venturing into socially controversial territory. Subject matter is channeled through a technology of production that manages the transformation of many voices into a singular author-function.

In the end, shared and interactive writing both model a kind of resolution. The writing ends, often happily, with a period. There are definitive answers to lunchroom incidents, and static formalizations to the production of daily news. The verbalization of a teacher's thinking leads to a finished product, and every aspect of the act of producing a piece—"the thinking, the format, layout, spacing, handwriting, spelling, punctuation, discussion of vocabulary" (Routman, 1994, p. 51)—leads to the creation of a "readable, cohesive piece" (Cunningham & Allington, 1999, p. 89). In sum, shared and interactive writing experiences produce models based on the traditions of printed text with beginnings, middles, and ends. They transform chaos and controversy into simple resolution. And, as models, they teach young students how to function as authors with alphabetic print and linear, coherent forms.

### **CHANGING THE WAY WE THINK ABOUT EARLY WRITING INSTRUCTION**

To be fair, interactive and shared writing experiences are not meant to be about how to produce texts that are *hyper*, or texts that leave room to think, or texts with multiple viewpoints, or texts with synergized images and words, or texts with graphical interfaces and meaning beyond the words. Classroom writing strives toward a different model, and has different intentions. In classroom situations, demonstrations of how writing "works" are governed by the technicalities of getting words down and meaning out in a particular form. Instruction in writing is set within boundaries of subject matter, character, resolution, and perspective. For educational purposes, these

boundaries are meant to tame the uncertain and awkward thoughts of an author. A student's self-expressions are contained by current assumptions about what a text "should" look like and how it "should" be written. Texts planned, put down, organized, made coherent, and filled with conventions, and our current pedagogical approaches limit the ways that thoughts may be represented. It's a full writing system, but educationally, it's not currently aimed at conceptual design, multiple voices, nonlinear plots, deep characterization, or meaning beyond denotation. Instead, it is currently aimed at teaching print concepts and grammar conventions. With additional boundaries around subject matter, character, and resolution, young students learn to internalize the lessons learned through modeled writing so that their own independent writing can take on similar characteristics. Texts are assumed to be whole, static, and final, and the young writer learns to make it so.

There is nothing inherently wrong with this. In many ways, the purpose of early writing instruction is to teach the relationship between letters and words, and the conventions of encoding alphabetic print. It is related to reading instruction; it is related to phonics. If this is our purpose, that is one thing. But if we imagine we are helping children learn more about a world influenced by changing forms of communication, that is quite another.

As Kress (1998) points out, "the last two decades have seen far-reaching change in media and modes of communication" (p. 57). Whether or not teachers teach the conventions of printed text in the classroom, conventions of communication are changing in the rest of the world. Images and sound carry information, and in many ways, "print has very nearly been pushed off the page" (Kress, 1998, p. 57). The changing "landscape of communication" (Kress, 1998, p. 57) is at a different elevation, and therefore in a mismatch, with techniques of early writing instruction.

To begin to understand the mismatches between ways of producing texts, it is important to note that to produce a piece of writing means to use an abstract system. For example, the sign system of the alphabet is an abstract system that people around the world who can read and write take for granted as a usual part of their realities. Tofts (1996) notes:

Replacing the iconographic structure of the pictogram, which signals objects in the world by way of visual resemblance, the alphabet installs a symbolic logic founded on a system of particles, whereby mental images of objects in the world must be triggered by arbitrary, conventional signs through a process of decipherment. In this sense, alphabetic literacy is every bit as abstract as mathematical or arithmetical literacy. The "sound images" triggered by the written word are communicated through the "detour of the sign" (Derrida, 1982, p. 9) in much the same way as the complex rigours of arithmetic computation . . . (p. 2)

Instruction that takes place on a conceptual level (e.g., the symbolic logic of the alphabet) relies on techniques that trans-

form the abstract into a concrete and expected form with specific characteristics (e.g., a written text that is "real"). Far from existing only on a conceptual level, abstract systems in general, and the alphabet in particular, alter the reality of lived experiences when the techniques and tools for producing "things" through an abstract system become embedded in social practices. The expected characteristics of writing are often understood and taken as given before the author functions as an author, especially in shared and interactive writing experiences in the classroom. Instruction in writing occurs because the conceptual level of meaning making is made concrete on the surface of a chart pad. Print exists; we can see it; we can refer to it; we can manipulate it. We teach young students how to do the same.

The conceptual levels of graphics, hypertextual storylines, multiple perspectives, interactive designs, and synergistic texts/images also exist. Far from existing only on a conceptual level, nonlinear, non-print, boundary-breaking messages exist as the (inter)textual elements of our social fabric. We can see them and refer to them in children's literature. We can manipulate and maneuver within the chaos they represent. Today, if we can imagine it, it just might be possible to represent it—through various modes of representation such as print, video, audio, graphic images, and many combinations in between.

In the same way that instruction can take place on the conceptual level of the alphabet, instruction can also take place on the conceptual level of textual design and ever-shifting perspectives (e.g., hypertext). This kind of instruction will rely on techniques that transform the abstract into a different kind of concrete: a textual form that represents the imaginative ranges and perspectives of students. While the representation of imagination can occur in multimodal ways in today's world of digital possibilities, the characteristics of contemporary children's literature indicate that simple paper will do. The educational question becomes: what will we do on a chart pad with a marker in a classroom full of thinking minds? Will we allow our students to alter the ways in which imagination is made real, the abstract made concrete? Will we allow them to represent the reality of their experiences through abstract sign systems that expand the horizons of alphabetic print? ●

## Notes

1. It should be noted that this is not entirely new: the images on the edges of medieval texts (Camille, 1992) conveyed meaning beyond the printed text as well. The shifts occurring now in the formats of children's literature are partly due to the computerization of type design and the photomechanical printing technologies available today (Dresang, 1999) but the technology is not the whole of the story. Ways of reading and writing have changed even when the same technology is being used (Myers, 1996; Saenger, 1997). It is important to note, as we begin the process of teaching and learning with computerized and digital technologies, that what we do



with the tools is dependent upon social context as well as technological constraints.

2. The term "hypertext" is most often associated with computer environments, but here, I am following Dresang's (1999) definition of hypertext, so that we may notice the elements of children's literature that are similar to computer hypertext. Dresang writes: "Hypertext refers to text that branches and allows choices to the reader; it is usually associated with the computer, but is used in this book to describe a hypertext-like experience in the handheld book" (p. 21). By the way the text is structured, hypertext gives readers choices in their reading, and a control over where (or whether) to engage in a particular branch of the story. As Dresang notes, "[h]ypertext puts the young reader in the driver's seat" (p. 63).
3. Kress (1998) points out that:

This is not the relation of illustration, where the written text fully carries all the information, for whatever reason. Here, both writing and image are informative. However, they are not informative in the same way or about the same things. A certain degree of specialization has occurred. Language has—here at least—the functions of narrating ("you did this, then you did that . . ."); of pointing ("Here is a simple circuit"); and still, of describing/explaining/classifying ("Transistors are examples . . .", "they are useful . . ."). But central, perhaps the central, aspects of information—what a circuit is like, how it works, what its components are—are now communicated by an image. (pp. 64–65)

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*Dawnene D. Hammerberg is Assistant Faculty Associate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the area of literacy education. Her research examines literacy education from sociocultural and critical perspectives as related to new technologies.*