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ABSTRACT

Meaning does not reside in the text or the reader but results from interactions between text, reader, and the interpretive communities that the readers belong to or that influence them. These interpretive communities are those communities or authorities that influence the reader/writer in interpreting texts, with resulting ideational, interpersonal, and personal effects. The interpretive communities serve seven functions: (1) selecting (topic, book, project for performance); (2) gathering additional information/collaborating; (3) integrating reading, writing, illustrating, and performing; (4) analyzing readership/authorship; (5) interpreting (getting/giving meaning); (6) taking a stance/perspective; and (7) evaluating/questioning (self-others). For a child, the interpretive communities consist of the intrapersonal, or the child's relationship between the self as reader and the self as writer as authorities and influences during interpretation. It also consists of the interpersonal, or the child's relationship with teachers, peers, family, and others as authorities and influences. The reading and writing logs and thinksheets of one little girl, Jill, at Atkinson Academy (New Hampshire) reveal several important roles that interpretive communities play. For Jill, a positive attitude toward herself as an author depended on her stories making sense and being considered great by her interpretive communities. Peer interpretive communities seem to play a much stronger role for writing than for reading in most areas, especially for interpreting texts. (HOD)

The Roles of Interpretive Communities for Reading and Writing at Atkinson Academy

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Paper presented as part of the Symposium: The Composing Behaviors of Young Readers and Writers (Robert Tierney, Avon Crismore, Mary E. Giacobbe) at the National Reading Conference, Austin, 1983.

Introduction

The processes of writing and reading a text are similar in that they both involve the act of interpretation. The writer interprets the world to the reader by means of a text; the reader interprets the text of the writer in order to interpret the world. The world, the text, and the act of interpretation are all involved in both activities, though in the reverse order. There is yet another similarity to consider in the act of interpretation for writing and reading and that is the influential role of interpretive communities. Stanley Fish points out the meaning does not reside in the text or the reader but results from interactions between text, reader and the interpretive communities that the reader belongs to or that influence him. These interpretive communities are groups or sub-cultures with shared conventions, knowledge, beliefs, values and interests. Interpretive communities exist for a child as well as an adult. Researchers and educators, however, have ignored the role that interpretive communities play not only in how a young child learns to become a reader, an author, and a critic, but also in the attitudes that develop towards reading, authoring, and learning in general. This paper will describe how our Reading/Writing Project wrestled with the interpretive communities issue, and will discuss the roles interpretive communities played at Atkinson Academy, especially for one little girl.

The process model of composing that undergirded this study seemed to us incomplete from the beginning. What seemed to be missing was 1) the interpersonal aspect--the interactions between the child meaning-maker (whether as reader or author) and authors, readers, peers, teacher, family, and other adults; and 2) the intrapersonal aspect, the interaction between the child's self intrapersonal aspect, the interaction between the child's self as reader

and the self as author during the composing process. The child's relationships to various selves or others who influenced him as a reader or writer in important ways seemed as necessary to examine as relationships to texts or relationships between ideas in texts. We developed a child's model of interpretation that included an interpretive communities component and have revised our model at least five times to date.

Our present model defines interpretive communities as those communities or authorities that are influences on the Reader/Writer for interpreting texts with resulting ideational, interpersonal, and personal effects (i.e. understanding ideas, a sense of readership/authorship, reading/writing for personal reasons. We divided our interpretive communities into two types: intrapersonal and interpersonal. The intrapersonal consists of a child's relationship between the self as reader and the self as writer as authorities and influences during interpretation. The interpersonal consists of a child's relationship with teachers, peers, family and others as authorities and influences. The influences result from shared knowledge of conventions, beliefs, values, and interests and can occur at different points in the interpretation process: early, middle or final points.

Interpretive communities have different roles or functions, then, for different parts of the interpretive process. For one child some functions are more important than others, while for another child, all functions are equally important. The data seemed to suggest that interpretive communities can have eight functions for a child:

Interpretive Community Functions

1. Selecting (topic, book, project for performance)
2. Gathering additional information/collaborating
3. Integrating reading, writing, illustrating, performing

4. Analyzing readership/authorship
5. Interpreting--getting/giving meaning
6. Taking a stance/perspective
7. Evaluating/questioning (self-others)

At Atkinson it is possible for a child and the interpretive communities to interact in several contexts. In order to understand the functions or roles of interpretive communities, at this school it is necessary to describe each context.

-Journals (Reading and Writing). The teacher expects each child to write daily in the reading journal and writing journal, reporting on what was read or written, discussing plans, problems, mental processes and feelings and answering questions posed by the teacher or responding to teacher comments. This is a written conversation or dialogue between child and teacher one-to-one.

-Conferences. These are child/teacher or child/peer one-to-one conversations, initiated by the child (usually) to get help for a reading or writing problem during the planning or drafting phrases of interpretation. The teacher expects each child to have an editing conference with her after the child has finished a written piece and reviewed it and conferenced with another child to see if it makes sense. The editing concerns are spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and sense.

-Small group collaboration. These are groups of 2-6 children for the purpose of collaborating on reading, writing, or performing projects. The collaborating is done mostly in school but sometimes out of school.

-Large group share meetings (Reading Share/Writing Share). These are teacher-initiated meetings where children share books (in progress or completed), written work, projects and performances with their peers and the teacher. Cards with written questions or suggestions or

comments by peers or the teacher are given to the child who is sharing. The child then responds to the question, suggestion or comment.

-Room 5 celebrates. Classroom publications of reviews of books read by children or which are published each semester and sent home to the family and to the other grades. They are teacher initiated and parents volunteer to type and help with the publications.

Perhaps the clearest way to determine the roles of interpretive communities and how they work is to take a close look at the way they influence one child at Atkinson, Jill. The data for this investigation comes from her reading and writing journals and the transcripts of the reading and writing interviews she had with Mary Ellen Giacobbe. The reading and writing logs and think sheets, and attitude measures.

How Interpretive Communities Influence Jill in Reading and Writing Selection.

Interpretive Communities are important in helping a child decide what to tead or write. Jill decides to read Encyclopedia Brown because Robin said it was a good book. After Jill chooses a book, she checks with Erin to get more information about it to see if it was a good choice--a book she can get "into". Before she begins to read supplementary basal, she asks some of her friends who have read it if there are any good stories or plays in it. A book The Horse is taken to Reading Share by Jill soon after she begins to read it for her peers' reactions. Based on these reactions, no doubt, she then decides to write her own book, also called The Horse. Jill states that her peers said her early drafts didn't make sense, so she "fixed up her book" after she "sees what they mean." The reading book reviews in the class publication also influences Jill in selecting books to read. Nowhere does Jill mention any interpretive communities, peers or teacher or family influencing

her selection of topics to write about. It is clear for selecting books, hpwever, her peers are very influential.

Gathering Information/Collaborating. Collaboration is a function of interpretive communities. Erin and Jill collaborate on a report on Spain, going to the library for information. "We found that Rome became part of Italy." Her teacher's influence is seen by Jills questions to her, "Do you keep track of all the books you read to us?" and "Do you do think sheets?" Jill is curious about her teacher's reading behaviors and the motivation for the reading log and think sheet requirements. She wonders no doubt, if only children keep track of books read, when they were started and finished, if they were abandoned or not and why, whether they were read alone or collaboratively, if a problem occured resulting in a conference, whether there were new appealing words, and the reactions to books. Logs, think sheets, and journals provide a means for teacher/Jill interactions where both gather information aobut Jill's reading and writing behaviors. Jill "does" Spain, with Erin as a resource.

Integrating Reading, Writing, Illustrating, Performing. In her journal, Jill writes, "We pass the book aorund and everyone writes, 'How to do a Magic Trick'." Jill and her peers read and write as a group. She reports to her teacher that she and three peers "are going to be writing and reading over the week-end" and that she and her play group are going to try reading and writing together. She comments that she liked it a lot, it was fun because "you get a choice of what you wan to do". Sometimes Jill works together with as many as five peers "Lisa, Lori, Angie, Robin, Jon and me" performing a peanuts play and sometimes she works with one pper "Me and Lisa were reading and Zoom! then we decided to do an experiment,"; "Me and Angie are doing a poem.

We eache are going to read half." The box trick Jill wrote about will be performed during writing share along with Robin and Lori's Magic Tricks. Jill asks Robin to illustrate her apple picking writing. It is clear that peers are important to Jill in reading and writing to perform a Magic Show, a play, a poem, and an experiment or to produce an illustrated writing. We can see from her journal that group work can be frustrating "Me and Lisa had a little trouble with Lorrie, Angie, Robin, and Erin" but also rewarding. Smal group reading and writing leads to performance during large group share where peers will question, comment, react, and applaud. Jills teachers asks her to explain how reading and writing are the same. Jill replies in her journal that, "In reading, it's all written down (already). All you have to do is read it. But in writing, you have to write about it." (And read it, too). And goes on "So (the way they are the same is that) they both have words." The teacher, as an interpretive community gives Jill the chance to integrate reading and writing with her peers to see the relationships and then asks her to articulate what she has experienced and learned doing the group projects. Bringing it to Share is the big motivator.

Analyzing--Authorship/Readership. One of the important functions of interpretive communities is to promote a sense of authorship or readership for a child. A child learns to analyze what it means to be an author or reader--to understand what authors and readers are like and what they do. The similarities and differences for adult professional authors and young novice authors are perceived. The notion that a third grader who writes is an author becomes more deeply ingrained. Jill considers herself and her peers as authors as well as the person who wrote Super Fudge. In her reading journal, she reports on the book she is presently reading--her own book on government

that she wrote especially for a certain reader, Maria. In another entry she states that she like Super Fudge and has figured out that "you have to be a good author to write a good book." Her teacher picks up on this comment and trys to encourage Jill to analyze what it takes to be a good author. Jill responds with the quality of creativity--"You have to be able to 'make-up' good books to be a good author."

The two class publications also intensify her sense of authorship and readership. Before she reads she thinks about all author friends and remembers the book they brought to conferences and share meetings, some abandoned, some completed, wondering why they chose the particular book they did for the reading class or writing class publication. She remembers their writing experiences, how long it took them to write it, how hard they had to work and the quality of their work as she evaluated it. As she reads books by adult authors she wonders about the same things--how long it took, whether there were any mistakes indicating not enough time was spent on the story, and why some choices were made and not others. From her own writing experiences and her interactions with her teacher and peers in conferences and Writing Share, she has come to see the importance of experiences, a large vocabulary, action words, and vivid description for authorship and readership.

Interpreting--Getting/Giving Meaning. Interpretive communities are useful for a child trying to make a book meaningful for herself/himself and others. Jill, like other children at Atkinson, has problems of various sorts as she reads and her interpretive communities often come to her aid. Her reading log shows that she had conferences with individual or groups of peers for five of the ten books she listed. Although she indicates that she abandoned four of the ten books, none of the four were those she had conferences for

with peers. The conferences with peers were apparantly a factor in her completing a book. she indicates in the interview that she might ask one of her friends or her teacher if she didn't understand a book, but she does not discuss reading conferences with her peers or teacher in her reading journal. What she does discuss in the journal are her problems with remembering a book she started earlier after being interrupted to do a report. Her teacher encourages her to continue with her question about reading strategies for forgetting. Jill's response indicates she knew what to do and did it, perhaps because of the prompt question. Her teacher encourages completion by her journal question, "Did you renew the book?" Although in this case, Jill didn't, she sees the value her teacher places on renewing books in order to finish them. Jill has a problem with understanding an important word for her--auction, and her teacher explains it in reply to Jill's indirect request for a definition she can understand. Her teacher also emphasizes the finishing of ends of books and getting the author's point in the Super Fudge questions. Jill ignores the first question and evaluates the book and asks if her teacher agrees with her rather than discussing the author's point. One of Jill's entries show she is responding to teacher questions about what she has learned about herself as a reader and what she does when she has learned about herself as a reader and what she does when she has reading problems. She states that she learned reading short books and taking a break from reading a long book (to do reports, no doubt) is fun and she uses context, phonics, and dictionary skills to decode problem words,. The teacher's comment gives positive feedback and the question encourages Jill to think about comprehension problems beyond the word level. Jill's reply "I skip it and go on to the next section" shows

she relies on herself rather than her peers for big problems in getting meaning.

For interpreting texts in writing, there is another story for a child and interpretive communities at Atkinson. A child like Jill interpreting texts for reading primarily relies on the teacher as interpretive community through the journal (and herself); but for writing primarily relies on peers as interpretive community (and herself). The teacher again influences Jill mostly with responses to Jill's direct and indirect requests and questions along with comments and questions concerning Jill's writing plans, decisions and progress in the journal dialogues and with the editing conferences and written responses on cards used during Writing Share. Jill mentions in her journal the help she receives from her teacher but emphasizes the help she receives from individuals like Lisa and Erin in Writing Share. Lisa is an important influence on Jill. Her teacher uses Lisa as a model for Jill "Just talk over with me what you plan to write like Lisa did for her fiction book". Jill uses the name Lisa for a character in her fiction story and goes to Lisa for help in the early stages of her fiction book. "When I first started, I had had a hard time but then Lisa helped me and it looks like I'm off to a good start." Jill says, " am going to bring my mystery to Share. I think I am off to a good start. It is hard to make-up a story when it's fiction." The teacher replies, "I agree! It sounds like you really are trying to organize it and to get help from Lisa! Keep me up on your progress, OK?" Jill responds, "OK." And on another day, "I don't know what the title is going to be about. So I am doing what Lisa is--for isntance (put the title), like when I am done, or in the middle of the book." Lisa and Jill work together on Erin's book, Taffy, Daffy and Friends, and

on the Magic Trick show.

In the writing interview Jill says she seeks help by bringing problems to group share and to individual people. She asks her peers to help her--help her with what is going to happen next, what to do next, if it sounds good, if it makes snese. Her peers make suggestions, and based on their suggestions decides, "Maybe I could make a change sometimes." On a writing journal entry she confirms this. "Today I did my fiction book. I first went through parts that were guessing (a problem to understand) to you and the group." Her peers, modeling their teacher, comment during Writing Share on Jill's ability to write with voice and feeling and interesting details, and ask how she decided to select information. The teachers values become the peers values and then become Jill's values.

In her journal entries we see Jill asking her teacher if she can bring her fiction book to share, her teacher granting the request and Jill then thanking her teacher for letting her share. She tells her teacher she loves writing and likes to share because she gets to answer questions and asks if that is true for the teacher, too. We also see her reaction to a peer who didn't respond to her writing as expected in a conference. "I conferenced with Linda. She didn't respond at all like Roger and Nester usually do. Do you know why? If you do, pleasr write (the reason)." During conferences and Share a child like Jill learns about alternative interpretations and perspectives, unexpected as well as expected responses from her interpretive communities.

The teachers influence on Jill's writing development is seen in the journal entries where she savs "I am thinking aobut what you told me about knowing the characters.", "I also told you what they (her fiction characters) are

like--like their personality." and "I did that lead you told me to do. The second one was the best." "Me and Erin are doing Italy. We are going to do that lead stuff on our Italy book." These statements were the result of conferences Jill had with her teacher as she wrote. Jill reports in her journal on the progress of her fiction story. "Today I am writing about the BJS and their adventures in the forest. Jumper escaped. The can not find him." The teacher asks, "How have you resolved the problem about why Jumper is missing?" Jill answers, "I didn't"-then on another day tells her teacher, "Well, I wasn't thinking when I answered your question. Yes, I did resolve the problem"-and goes on to explain that "Jumper fell and hurt himself had and didn't tell anybody because he didn't want to interrupt the fairy tale Blacky was telling Stripes". An ingenious way for Jill to solve the problem posed by her teacher and her text! The teacher not only helps Jill learn about voice, leads, details, developing characters and problem resolution through conferences and journal responses, she also listens and reacts to Jill's complaint about not having time to write her own things. The teacher asks her "What things? Why?" and Jill says, "Like Ice Capades (her own next new topic to write about) and not Magic." Jill likes groups writing but feels it interferes with her own individual authoring.

It is clear that peers and teacher as interpretive communities help Jill along the way in her writing--early, middle and late stages. The teacher has an especially strong impact on the final stage when the editing conference between teacher and child is required. In the interview Jill explains that after the final draft is written, she reexamines it herself to pick out things that "really go", brings it to Share to make sure it sounds good. Then if everyone likes it, she starts editing it, circling

words thought to be mispelled and then checking them in the dictionary, and finally going to her teacher for an editing conference. The teacher checks for other mispelled words, punctuation and "stuff that doesn't make sense." One journal entry shows the teacher's expectation for Jill. Jill asks, "Can I have an editing conference with you tomorrow some time?" The teacher answers, "Yes, but have you reread it yourself and conferenced with others to see if you make sense and it is your best?" Other entries mention editing conferences. "I edited with you today." "I had to have an editing conference with you, so I only got a little bit done on my final draft on Italy."

Taking a Stance/Perspective. Jill reports that in her reading book, Iggie's House, "...so the black people have to move. Winnie is on the black people's side." The teacher asks, "What side would you be on? Why?" encouraging Jill to take a stance on the issues relating the book to the world around her, and asking for Jill's opinions and rationale for the perspective she takes. Jill answers, "the black peoples." Perspective taking is encouraged for reading but not for writing--at least Jill does not mention writing where she takes a stance and explains why or gives her opinions and gives reasons or facts to back them up except as a critic of writing in her semi-private journals.

Evaluating Growth in Reading and Writing. At one place in the writing interview we see Jill evaluating her growth as a writer as she points out how little she and her peers knew about writing in first grade. "I couldn't write in the first grade. It didn't come out too good." When asked if she used to have peer conferences, she replies, "Yes. Well, they didn't really

know what was going on either." Two years later, as a third grader, we see her growth in writing knowledge and her growth as a critic of herself, her peers, and professional authors. In her interview she says, referring to the writing class publication, that she would be comparing a story by Lisa to one by Jennifer, evaluating which was best and why, in case anyone asked her. She says she thinks about how people come to write good and how good this peer story is compared to popular authors "how good theirs is for a little boy or girl compared to a big author and what the differences are between." Jill's interpretive communities have made it possible for her to be a critic of her peers' writing and her own writing.

In this reading journal entry she evaluates the author, Erin. "My Kitten is a good story. It is about Erin's kitten and what she can do and how old she is. I like how she did her book. It is a good book for a little author." She describes an assignment ("a really wierd assignment") by the teacher asking her to find a place in her writing where the book doesn't make sense and make another copy or use arrows to fix it up. Jill reports she used both for hers and says she didn't get too far because it took awhile to find a place", indicating she was a careful self-evaluator. In answer to a question about how she's grown as a writer, Jill responds, "I put a lot more information and do more drafts, too. I am going to write a fiction book pretty soon (seen as a more cmplex writing task, no doubt). I am writing longer papers now." "I also have been trying to improve my penmenship." Her teacher comment, "You are not rushing any more, too. And you know what? Your books seem more focussed and have more action in them". Jill and the interview explain in the interview why she enjoys writing now. "Because the stories make sense" and "I wrote some Christmas stories; they (peers)

thought they were great." For Jill, a positive attitude toward herself as an author depends on her stories making sense (capable of interpretation) and considered great by her interpretive communities. Her peers make a difference.

Peers do not seem to make a difference for her attitude toward reading. She says in the interview that she likes to read because it is fun and that she does not read for anyone else but only herself. There is no mention of peers. She has little to say in her reading journal about her growth as a reader. She says she now reads longer books and does not put them aside and work on something else. At one point she discusses her play project saying, "You watched and said it was better than before." Her teacher then asks, "What do you think? Is it better? And, why?" Jill replies, "It doesn't take so long." The teacher as interpretive community has influenced Jill and her peers to evaluate and become critics. Jills criticism seems more directed at writing than reading perhaps because writing carries with it a visible product or because she knows more about writing or because writing is more emphazied in the classroom.

By looking at the data for one child, Jill, it is possible to draw some tentative conclusions about the role of interpretive communities at Atkinson. The main conclusion is that peer interpretive communities seem to play a much stronger role for writing than for reading in most areas, especially

for interpreting texts. Although for reading interpretive communities are important influences on a child in selecting a book, gathering information, integrating reading and writing, and taking a stance, they are considerably less important in actually interpreting a text (getting meaning), and evaluating (becoming a critical reader). It is also clear the journal,

log and think sheets are important means for the teacher's influencing the child but that peers are seen as the primary interpretive community by the child rather than the teacher. Family and other interpretive communities seem to play a minor role at Atkinson. These are but beginning steps in examining the roles of interpretive communities. Much more need to be done in this area.

References

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