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ABSTRACT

A study examined the feedback associated with "author's chair" to determine the opportunities provided for students to learn about literacy. Subjects, six boys and three girls between the ages of 8 and 10 in a self-contained classroom for students identified as learning disabled, were exposed to a process-oriented approach to writing instruction in which students wrote for about 20 minutes daily in journals on topics of their own choice, had short exchanges daily with the teacher about their writing, and engaged in feedback sessions each Friday for 1.5 hours. Students assumed the "author's chair" voluntarily with the understanding that feedback from the other students was to begin with a positive comment about the writing. Researchers were present and participated in all feedback sessions during a school year. Data regarding feedback were compiled from field notes, video recordings, and the journals themselves. Results indicated that: (1) the norms which emerged from the discourse occurring during the feedback sessions came to represent the equivalent of writing conventions among the children in this community; (2) discussions during feedback mediated children's understandings and development of such features of writing as description, character development, and character motivation; (3) there were occasions when the multiple audiences represented by adults and children placed diverse demands on the children that were not easily reconciled; and (4) at times, the discourse of the students constituted zones through which their peers navigated more readily than those constituted by adults. (RS)

# [1] *Examining "Feedback" as a Context for Literacy Learning among Students Identified as Learning Disabled*

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Increased attention to the dialectical relationships between the individual and the social context has led to a burgeoning of interest in collaborative learning. Propelled by social constructivist theories regarding the internalization of dialogues initially experienced in social contexts, we are driven to ask how classrooms become learning communities in which each participant contributes to the emergent understandings of all members, despite having unequal knowledge concerning the topic under study.

Writing provides an extremely rich problem space in which to examine peer collaboration to the extent that writing is a complex and demanding cognitive activity, requiring both generative and reflective skills. Learning about writing in a social as opposed to individual/solitary context provides multiple opportunities. For example, talk about text makes more salient the ways in which written language differs from spoken language. Discussion about writing provides a forum for making explicit and public the generally invisible and perhaps unexamined processes that facilitate composition (Daiute, 1986; Flower et al., 1990). Furthermore, a social approach to writing instruction provides a context for distributed cognition; by pooling their emergent understandings about becoming writers, the demands on any one individual are shared out.

In recognition of the value of a social context for learning about writing, there are several procedural routines that are promoted in contemporary approaches to writing; for example, conferencing and "author's chair." In this paper we examine the feedback associated with author's chair to determine the opportunities provided for students to learn about literacy in this context.

Specifically, we explore the following issues:

*What opportunities arise as students who are learning about the process of writing provide one another feedback about their text?*
*What types of learning are mediated through the feedback sessions?*
*What is revealed about students' sense of "audience" in feedback sessions?*
*What are examples of the types of responses that students make to feedback sessions?*

## The Classroom Context

This study was conducted in a self-contained classroom for students identified as learning disabled. There were six boys and three girls, between the ages of eight and ten, all of whom were experiencing significant difficulties learning to read and write and to use reading and writing in meaningful ways.

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While this was the students' first year in this classroom, all of these students had been in special education settings for at least one year prior to the year this study was conducted, and in fact, this research group had the opportunity to observe most of these students in their previous schools and classrooms. These children's previous experiences with literacy learning are reflective of the kinds of instructional practices that have been observed in special education and remedial settings (McGill-Franzen & Allington, 1991; Leinhardt et al., 1982). That is, the children principally worked alone on low-level tasks, such as copying or worksheet completion. There were very few occasions for the students to learn about writing in supportive contexts or to use writing in meaningful ways.

The special educator in this classroom assumed a different - "process" oriented - approach to writing instruction and instituted journal writing and feedback sessions at the beginning of the school year. The students were given spiral bound notebooks in which to make their journal entries. They were invited to write using forms (pictures, invented spellings), genres, and topics of their choice. They generally wrote 20 minutes a day and while the teacher had short exchanges with the children daily regarding their writing, the most extended and significant exchanges about the writing occurred during feedback sessions which were held for one- to one-and-a-half hours each Friday. Students assumed the "author's chair" on a voluntary basis with the understanding that feedback from each member of the group was to begin with a positive comment about the writing. Researchers were present and participated in all feedback sessions. Data regarding feedback were compiled from field notes, video recordings, and the journals themselves.

Writing and Students with Learning Disabilities

Before addressing the issues that we have presented above regarding feedback sessions, we want to provide a very brief summary of a few of the issues germane to examining writing instruction with students identified as learning disabled. We begin with the observation that performance differences between students with and without learning disabilities are greater for writing than for reading tasks (Englert & Thomas, 1987). These differences have been attributed to a number of characteristics of students identified as learning disabled, for example, difficulties related to short-term memory, selective attention, metacognitive knowledge, and perspective taking (Graham & Harris, 1989; Wong et al., 1989).

In previous research that we have conducted with these students (Klenk, in press; Palincsar & Klenk, 1992; Palincsar, Klenk, Anderman, Parecki, & Wilson, 1991), we have been particularly concerned about the ways in which the impoverished understandings of students in special education classrooms regarding the nature of writing may serve to impair their progress. For example, in interviews these students equate writing with copying, do not identify nor spontaneously demonstrate an understanding of the instrumentality of writing, and report that success with writing depends upon such factors as building strong muscles or holding one's pencil correctly. We have argued that the reductionist and mechanistic ways in which these students learn about writing serve to reinforce these impoverished understandings and may exacerbate the problems these children display with intentional learning activities.

For this reason, we were particularly excited about the opportunity to investigate the responses of these students to a different approach to writing instruction in which there was an emphasis on using writing for communicative and epistemic purposes and to instruction which occurred in a socially supportive context. To discuss the opportunities afforded in the feedback sessions, we have identified particular occasions and illustrate them with cases.

Where do ideas come from? Mediating idea generation and establishing norms for intertextuality.

Certainly one of the greatest challenges in writing is the generation of ideas - and this is a particularly significant challenge for students with writing difficulties (Englert, Raphael, and Anderson, in press). Therefore, it is no surprise that "getting started" was frequently a topic of

discussion during feedback sessions and became an important aspect of writing that was mediated in the students' discourse. Consider the following case in which Joey, who was moved from a class for students with emotional impairments to this classroom mid-year, is confronting the author's chair although he has yet to make a journal entry because, as might be predicted, he is somewhat at a loss as to where to begin. Joey has observed two previous feedback sessions and on this occasion the teacher inquired as to whether he would like some assistance with ideas. Reluctantly, Joey assumed the auth r's chair and the discussion began with the teacher asking the class: "How do you get ideas? How do you put down your ideas? How can we help Joey?" The suggestions begin: Allan: "I put my feet against the wall while I am laying on the floor and the ideas flow to my head." Joey's evaluation of this suggestion is that this would give him a headache. Allan offers yet another idea: "Dreaming when you sleep can give you ideas." However, Joey indicates that he doesn't dream. The first few suggestions are then followed by a flood of ideas, including Gregg's observation that he gets ideas from movies, TV, and books. Gregg makes explicit his use of intertextuality by sharing with the class how he combined Robocop and Bugs Bunny to invent a character that is central to his writing: Robobunny. The class adds additional ideas such as: relaxing, getting ideas from other people, and making clay figures.

How does Joey respond to this feedback session? Two weeks later he is crafting a story in which he combines two characters from horror movies (Texas Chainsaw Massacre and Childs Play). It appears that the suggestion that he work from movies has enabled Joey to begin. The catch here is that Joey has not seen the horror movies from which he is drawing the characters and members of the class who are familiar with the movies, in turn, resist his story. Joey suggests that the class could help him if those who have seen Texas Chainsaw Massacre would tell him more about the characters.

What emerges over the course of these feedback sessions are norms regarding intertextuality. It is perfectly acceptable to borrow across texts; however, if one does not invent one's own character out of these texts, then one is expected to be faithful to the original text. By the next journal entry Joey has indeed invented his own characters: Teenage Mutant Ninja Fish. As this entry shows, it is a highly imaginative and detailed adventure story.

James and the Segagenesis story: Confronting the Challenges of Multiple Audiences

The following description of James reveals clearly how, at times, the children in this class could operate more effectively within a classmate's "ZPD" than could the adults who participated in feedback time.

James' writing was limited to one topic throughout most of the school year. Nearly all his stories were about his pet white mice, a topic on which James had gained expertise through the actual raising of mice (at one point it was estimated that there were 50 mice at James' home). James not only wrote about his mice, at feedback time he often got down on the floor and acted out mouse-like behavior. In short, James was into mice. Eventually his classmates lost enthusiasm for mice stories, and several children asked James if that was all he could write about

During a feedback session in December, James shared a story about his weekend visit to Santa Claus at a local store. James had requested a Segagenesis game for Christmas, at which point the teacher asked for clarification: "What is a Segagenesis?" James attempted to explain, became confused, and finally told the teacher that Segagenesis was just like Nintendo except that it used a different machine, and that one had to go through stages of the game to get higher up. Seeing that James had become frustrated, Andee changed the subject [inquiring about a second item on his Christmas wish list]. Following this feedback session James returned to the topic of mice for his written stories.

Not until March did James attempt to write a story about a different topic. After returning from the school's Spring Break in March, James made this entry in his journal:

" I conquered Mario Brothers III on Sunday, March 22, 1992, and it was my first time conquering it. And I got four rolls of p-wings. You can only go to eight worlds. . ."

James went into great detail about the game and how it is played. For a month he elaborated on this topic in his journal. He received two types of responses to his story during feedback time. The children asked questions and made comments that displayed their shared knowledge and vocabulary unique to the game. Gary asked, "Does King Cupa spit fireballs? Gregg asked, "Can you describe p-wings? What is a Tanuki?" The children wanted James to elaborate on characters with whom they already were familiar. James answered these questions with poise and accuracy . In fact, Gregg reported during one feedback session that he had played Mario Brothers at a friends house, and had scored better than ever after listening to James' story.

On the other hand, the adult audience asked James for clarification on more procedural issues. At one point the teacher told James, "I don't find this [story] real interesting because I'm lost. Teach me from the beginning. I am getting very frustrated because I need clarification. You need to answer the questions I am asking you." Organizing information had always been problematic for James. Nevertheless, he continued responding to these requests for clarification. His responses only confused the adults further, and eventually James threw up his hands and went back to writing mice stories.

It seems from this narrative that James was responsive both to his peers and to the adults in his audience. He tried to please and interest his classmates by changing his topic when they questioned him on this. He tried and tried to please the teacher and researchers by searching for ways to clarify his story with explanations. An important opportunity for mediation was missed here, however. It seemed clear that the children had enough experiential background with computer games to understand the gist of James' story. It might have been very fruitful for the adults to ask, for example, "I'm still having difficulty understanding this game. Can someone else think of a way to help James explain the game to me?" Another option might have been to encourage a collaborative effort for writing a "Guide Book to Mario Brothers III," an opportunity that might have improved James' social stature in the class.

With regard to the requests for clarification made by the adult members of the audience, it seems that these requests posed a challenge to James that might have gone beyond the bounds of prolepsis for James. However, given that organizational skills were so demanding on James, it is possible that, within a meaningful context such as feedback for writing, it may have been appropriate for James to struggle with these issues. Certainly this was a practice opportunity - James was not being graded or tested for his ability to organize explanations or to clarify the points he was making.

Most salient in this description, it seems, is the importance of a shared understanding not just of the activity at hand, but of the information at hand. Because of their shared knowledge about Mario Brothers III, James' peers were able to ask questions that established him as an expert. The adults' questions only seemed to reinforce James' image as a child with a learning disability.

<u>The Tale of Jack Rabbit: The role of audience in mediating author's license and character development</u>

Early in the year, Gary wrote a story about <u>Rax the Bat</u>. Within this story, he introduced the character of Jack Rabbit. The following information was provided about him:

*Rax made a mutant rabbit he named Jack. Jack is 10 foot 8.*

Several weeks later, he decided to write a story starring his rabbit character, Jack. It was not an unusual circumstance for the children in this classroom to bring back characters they had made up before. Within this classroom community, the students quickly became familiar with each other's characters, and excitedly welcomed the more interesting ones back when they appeared in new adventures. Gary wrote the following:

*Jack found a lion. The lion's name is Joe. The lion and Jack were friends. Twenty years later, Jack grew up huge. Jack and Joe met a wolf named Peter. Peter, Jack and Joe met a mean lion. A raccoon jumped out, and the mean lion ran. A weasel jumped out behind them, and said hi. Then they ran into a squirrel, and then a badger jumped out, and then a wolverine jumped out, and then a bat jumped out. Then Jack punched a bear. It was a large brown bear.*

In response to this story during the feedback session, the following occurred:

**Allen**: Why was he huge?

**Gary:** Because he ate all his vegetables.

At this point, the children have a hard time believing this information. They don't believe a rabbit could get that big just eating vegetables, so they question him again. Dyson (1988) has suggested that when children question the logic of other children's stories by directly referring to their internal inconsistencies, and then note their possible need for assistance in sense making, they are helping one another to grow. They are sharing expertise and knowledge, and interactively 'stretching" each other's Zones of Proximal Development. However, in this case, before another child could jump in to try to "make sense of" Gary's statement, the teacher responded by saying the following:

**Teacher**: Gary is an author, and an author can say anything in a story, and people take it on faith [author's license].

This is the teacher's agenda, to help the children to understand about literature, and its conventions. A fiction writer does, indeed, have this prerogative. The question here is: will Gary accept this notion, and just tell the children that's the way it is?
The answer follows in the next line:

**Gary**: Adds that the rabbit crawled into mutagen.

As you can see, Gary is much more interested in making sense to his peers than in embracing writing conventions. His preferred audience is definitely his peers. This will be exhibited further by the next example, where Scott asks Gary another question regarding the logic of his story.

**Scott**: Who is the enemy?

**Gary**: It's the Alaskan Brown Bear.

**Scott**: Questions the validity of a rabbit punching a Brown Bear.

**Teacher**: Reminds the class that these stories are fiction, and that the author can make up anything he wants.

Rather than just accepting another child's criticism outright this time, Gary questions Scott about turning his character from a salamander to a dinosaur in one of his previous stories. He obviously wanted either a direct explanation or Scott's acceptance of the teacher's statement of author's license. He got neither, and the teacher moved the conversation along.

**Teacher**: Suggests Gary write more about Jack's super characteristics.

**Gary**: Responds that Jack is super strong.

As Gary sat down, following his turn in the author's chair, he immediately scratched out the page that he wrote, and illustrated Jack Rabbit punching the Brown Bear. This was in direct response to Scott's earlier criticism. Gary immediately, with the stroke of a pen, restructured his story due to reflection on student comments. This action also magnifies the importance Gary places on his peers as the target audience for his tales. At this point, he was much more concerned about what they thought than about what the teacher said. This episode reminds us of the observation by Dyson & Geneshi (1988, p. 792) that teachers can work very hard to scaffold

children's understanding of the problem when, in fact, the teacher and students are not all on "on the same problem."

Two weeks later: Gary writes Jungle Revenge, another story about Jack Rabbit.

*Jack is walking through the jungle, and he runs into a frog.*
*Jack Rabbit runs 110 miles per hour.*

Response to this story at feedback session went as follows:

**Teacher**: How else is Jack Rabbit different that other rabbits?

Here, she is looking for detail and explanation, two very important story elements. In order for an audience to understand a story, they have to know about the characters, places and action, and also need to understand the plot.

In response to her question:

**Gary**: He's a mutant, bigger, stronger, can tear out a tree.

**Scott**: Is he a mutant like the turtles?

Here Scott is trying to understand why Jack is a mutant, and asks Gary in such a way as to provide him with an answer if he wants one. He has identified mutant characters that he believes Gary knows, and can use to inform others about his character's appearance and powers. This is something the children in this class do often. They seem to try to help each other out, and constantly offer ideas and information. In this case, however, it doesn't work right away.

**Gary**: I don't understand. I never saw that episode.

**Scott**: Tries to explain, and once again give Gary a way to make sense about what's going on. However, the teacher interjects, and asks Gary directly how Jack Rabbit became a mutant.

**Gary**: Answers that he doesn't know, and wonders how Scott's animals became mutants. At this point, he begins to get uncomfortable, and wants assistance. The teacher prefers he figure it out himself, and once again requests that he explain himself.

Gary becomes very frustrated, and doesn't answer. He is in desperate need of someone to bridge his knowledge and help him out of this jam. Scott and Allen try hard to do this with the following two questions.

**Scott**: Was he ever like a regular jack rabbit?

**Gary**: No, he was always a mutant.

**Allen**: Were his mother and father mutants?

**Gary**: No answer At this point, Gary has decided not to deal with this mutant issue any longer.

Another child, still interested in Jack Rabbit changes the subject form how he became a mutant to what he could actually do.

**James**: What else did Jack Rabbit do? Why did he go all those high speeds?

Gary has now picked up the jargon used by the teacher when asking the children to fill in their stories to make them clearer. He responds:

**Gary**: I'm just **describing** (a word at the top of the teacher's list during feedback sessions). I don't know why he goes so fast. God gives all things special qualities (an indisputable answer, which allows him to exit gracefully).

Later that month, after he has plenty of time to think about it, Gary decides to write another story about Jack Rabbit. He starts this story as follows:

*The Jack Rabbit*

*Jack Rabbit got mutated by ooze that is neon green. The ooze came out of the sewer.*

The story continued on, and told more about Jack's many adventures, but the point here is that Gary felt it necessary to address two issues. One issue dealt with "sense making" for the other children in the class. He knew they didn't "buy" the vegetable idea as the reason for Jack's size, so he did go back, and use Scott's suggestion about the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Jack had the same thing happen to him, as they did, a tried and true formula, guaranteed to be accepted. The other issue brought forth here is in response to the teacher. By explaining how Jack became huge, Gary also satisfied the teacher's request for explanation and detail. He was able to build his character to please both audiences. With his actions, Gary has indirectly acknowledged that

writing for him has to do with both wanting to appear competent and knowledgeable about the conventions of good writing, but yet also wanting to say something unique and interesting that will be judged valuable by the other children.

Freddy and Chuckie: The role of audience in mediating character motivation

It is late March, and Gregg decided to write the story of Freddy and Chuckie, his own unique combined character based on the movie characters Freddy Krueger and Chuckie the Doll from the movie, Child's Play. This tale will be the next in a series of adventures that Gregg has written, which contain a great amount of graphic violence. The researcher had cringed many a time listening to these gruesome and gory stories of the past. Gregg noticed this, and showed concern. He asked me why Andee felt this way. Andee told him that his stories scared her. In response to this several things occurred within this new story. The most obvious being that he rated the story "R" at the very top of the page, and brought this to the class' attention. He remarked that he had done this, so she would know what was coming. This was the first time that Gregg had been sensitive to an adult's feelings in the audience, as previously his stories and their overt horror were directed at an appreciative audience of his peers.

Interestingly enough the first time he read his story, Freddy and Chuckie slaughtered the boy (his owner) and his dad, who were camping. It seemed that the mom was lucky that she had stayed home, but luck was not really in her favor, as Gregg told us that Freddy and Chuckie was on his way to kill her. When Gregg re-read his story the following week, the class noticed that he had left out the part about the mother:

**Joey**: Why did you change the story? You left out the part about slaughtering the mom.
**Gregg**: I was following Mrs. Brozo's suggestion to just describe things more. Besides, Andee doesn't like all the slaughtering.

Here one notices two important things: 1) Gregg has chosen to address this researcher's sensitivity to violence by editing out what he considers an unnecessary and violent part of the story in terms of the upcoming story line. 2) He has internalized the teacher's expectations for what makes a good story, and has tried to anticipate the kinds of questions she might ask by providing added detail and explanation. he also feels by invoking both the teacher's and researcher's names within his answer, that it will be better accepted as an adequate reason for changing his story.

The researcher, ever curious as to what happened to the mom, being one herself, asked,
**Andee**: If the mom wasn't slaughtered, where was she when he went in the house to steal things (part of last week's story)?
**Gregg**: Food shopping

Reflecting back on last week's story, the researcher exclaimed, "GUESS SHE WAS PRETTY LUCKY AFTER ALL!", and the children in the class all agreed.

As the story went on, and Freddy and Chuckie began slaughtering people, and it became more and more violent, Gregg decided to take a break from all of this, and interject a scene where Freddy and Chuckie took a breather from all the violence, and watched Bugs Bunny on TV. This again appeared to be an acceptable way in which to please everyone in the audience. Following this "break", Gregg goes back to this extremely violent story, but interestingly enough, he brings in almost "moral" reasoning as to why Freddy and Chuckie kill:

*Freddy and Chuckie had a flashback of his wolverine and his wolf because he loved them, and why he is killing people is because they killed his animals.*

Gregg grew a great deal as a writer with the creation of this story. He learned to accommodate multiple audiences in regard to their feelings about his chosen topic. He was also able to internalize the teacher's expectations for what is contained in a good story, and work those things in, so as to anticipate many of her questions before they were asked. As all this was going

on, Gregg still managed to hold his peers in suspense, and involve them deeply in his adventure. He never really eliminated his violence and horror, but rather just tempered it to work for everyone including himself. When Gregg was able to please the adults and his classmates, he was the happiest and most successful. Interestingly enough, as the story went on for two months, Gregg began to question just pure senseless violence. This was in response to a researcher asking him why Freddy and Chuckie killed so much. It was at the end of the story that he finally responded to this. He explained why the character killed, giving him "good" reason in his eyes, and further, Gregg did not end his tale with a violent death. The last person he was to kill escaped, suggesting the character was not 100% evil. All in all, this was an extremely successful story for Gregg with a positive outcome for all involved including himself, as observed by the comment that Gregg made following feedback, "I am very happy with this story."

## Conclusion

Despite the hypothetical opportunities provided by feedback sessions, there has actually been little investigation of these sessions in terms of the nature and consequences of the exchanges between students and teachers as well as among children. Our investigation of a sampling of feedback sessions that occurred over an academic year revealed ways in which norms emerge from the discourse occurring during feedback. In fact, these norms come to represent the equivalent of writing conventions among the children in this community. Furthermore, discussions during feedback serve to mediate children's understandings and development of such features of writing as description, character development, and character motivation. There are also caveats emerging from these observations. One parallels the observation made by Daiute and Dalton (in press) that children may be failing in school because expert knowledge comes to them in ways they don't understand and relate to. Investigations of the cases presented in this paper as well as other sessions from this class suggest that there are occasions when the multiple audiences represented by adults and children place diverse demands on the children that are not easily reconciled. Furthermore, there is evidence that the discourse of the students - at times - constitutes zones through which their peers navigate more readily than those constituted by adults.

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