

Using iPads to Develop a Sense of Story

JulieAnn Kniskern and Cheryl Klassen
(with Aiden)



“Thank you for believing in me.”

This was the message that was conveyed to me by 5-year-old Aiden, one of the senior kindergarten children in the all-day, every-other-day classroom in which I studied the students’ writing throughout the 2015-2016 school year, from September to June. Aiden was an interesting child because he always had a “plan” for whatever he wrote. He always considered what he was going to write. Most times, he would draw a diagram of what he was going to write about. Then he would begin his story.

During the months of April, May, and June, I was the classroom “Writing Centre.” Any students who wanted to write a story would come to the table at which I was sitting, and we would discuss what tools they wanted to use when they were writing/composing their story. The choices that the students had were pencil, pen, coloured markers, crayons, paint, and either paper or an iPad computer.

Aiden usually selected paper and pencil or markers. Before he wrote any words/letters down on his paper, he would always make a plan. He said that his dad, who is a carpenter, always made a plan before he constructed anything – and he was doing what his dad always did. Also, Aiden’s mother always wrote lists, so Aiden was also a list maker to make sure that he had the necessary items to make whatever he was constructing. Aiden and I would discuss his plans. Then he would search around the classroom for whatever he needed to construct and write about what he made.

Aiden planned and made a variety of items within the classroom. Sometimes he needed to take his plans home and he constructed his final product with his dad. One example was his leprechaun trap. Around St. Patrick’s Day, Mrs. Klassen, the senior kindergarten teacher, had read a story about leprechauns and how difficult they were to capture. Most of the students made two-dimensional leprechaun traps, but Aiden took his drawing home and constructed a three-dimensional leprechaun trap with his dad. A few days later, he brought it to school to show the other children. The other children in the class were fascinated with what he had made and they, too, wanted to make three-dimensional objects/traps just like Aiden. He always was willing to help

children with creating their own three-dimensional objects that were a part of his story telling. Every object that Aiden made always had a story attached to it. His imagination was quite compelling.

At the end of the school year in June, Aiden found some balloons while he was scouring around the classroom looking for some objects to inspire him to create a new story. The day was quite windy, and when Aiden came in from recess he decided to make a kite. The kite was made of construction paper, but he discovered that the paper was too heavy to fly. He needed something lighter. He redesigned his kite with plain white newspaper material for the body. Again, it needed something else to get the kite off the ground. This is when he put a balloon on each end of triangular-shaped kite. This helped to raise the kite into the air.

As he experimented with the right number of balloons to give lift-off to his kite, it was interesting to listen to Aiden talking through the problem. Several other students were now gathered around Aiden. They had also fashioned kites following Aiden's initial plan, substituting different types of paper to get their kites light enough to lift off the ground and experimenting with size, shapes, and colours to see which items made a difference in flying the kites that they were constructing. It was fascinating to listen to the students constructing their kites. Some were doing "self-talk", and others were talking to each other about the best way to construct their kites. Suddenly, it was time to clean up and get ready to go home. The children who were constructing kites took them home to continue working on them with a sibling or parent.

Aiden was often the catalyst for classroom events that happened around the Writing Centre. While many children would come to the Writing Centre without a plan, Aiden always had a plan, and then, through discussion, his plan would be fleshed out and together we would write the rest of his story. Sometimes I would scribe for Aiden, especially when he was so eager to get his story on paper that the words just came tumbling out. Other times, he wanted to physically write his story as he pondered which way he wanted the narrative to go. At these times, Aiden applied what he had learned from Mrs. Klassen about the different shapes and sounds of the upper and lower case alphabet letters and words in his "Writing Book."

Aiden was always in charge of his learning. At the Writing Centre in the afternoon, I always had a variety of tools for writing/composing, and the students always had a choice. Some students, like Aiden, came to the Writing Centre almost daily. He had adventures, and he wanted to tell everyone about them. Sometimes he didn't finish his stories in class, and he took them home to finish with his mom or dad. Eventually, he brought his stories back to class and often shared them with the class during "Show and Tell" or "Author's Chair" time.

Aiden's classmates were very respectful and enjoyed listening and responding to Aiden's adventure stories. Aiden's family is building a new house, and Aiden is participating in the process. One day, something very heavy fell on his dad's foot and he had to be taken to the hospital in Brandon. This was very frightening for Aiden. His father had to remain in hospital for several days. Aiden was very upset about his father's injury, and this dominated his stories for several weeks. Later in the winter, Aiden's dad developed pneumonia and had to be hospitalized again. This was another scary event for Aiden. He needed to understand that whatever the hospital's doctors recommended was what needed to be done for his dad to get well. Aiden was very relieved when his Dad was able to come home.

Aiden and his dad loved to go ice fishing on Oak Lake in the winter. Aiden wrote elaborate stories about all of the equipment needed first to haul the ice shack onto the ice with the snowmobile, and then to make a hole in the ice with an auger so that the actual fishing could begin. Aiden described the fish that he and his dad caught and brought home for his mom to cook for supper. He said that the fresh fish dinners were delicious! Although other students in the class went ice fishing with their fathers and grandfathers, none of them described in depth and illustrated the process of preparing to ice fish, as well as the process of catching fish through the ice, culminating in actually eating the fish that were caught.

While Aiden had beginning, middle, and ends to his stories, many of the other students in the class could do only one or two parts of the writing process, but not all three parts and bring it to a

conclusion. Aiden was quite precocious in his understanding of the three basic parts of a story (beginning, middle, and end), as well as characterization and plot. He also provided a great deal of description to his stories. His stories were complex in the details that he provided to explain the various events and characters that he portrayed.

Aiden is a prime example of how a 5-year-old child develops a sense of story. Our research project, which studied the relative usefulness of using the iPad “Sense of Story” application to develop a sense of story with senior kindergarten children, revealed some notable findings:

- When given a choice of traditional writing/drawing utensils or iPads, most of our young students chose pencil-and-paper over technology. Many had prior experience with iPads as a gaming device. They may have associated iPads with fun-and-games, instead of with academic learning, or they may have viewed the traditional writing tools as something “new.”
- All of the students used illustrations in their stories. Some, like Aiden, drew the pictures or made other visual constructions – and then developed their storylines. Others created the storylines first, and then added illustrative components. Regardless of which came first – the story or the illustrations – the children enjoyed experimenting with writing utensils, colours, shapes, and textures.
- The teacher makes the difference! Mrs. Klassen is an experienced teacher who understands children and how their creative juices flow. She is a master of facilitation in the early years classroom, orchestrating opportunities for children to use their imaginations and apply more formal classroom lessons to less formal learning contexts.
- The children make another difference! Aiden and his classmates openly contributed to each other’s learning and writing experiences. Their imaginations were the fuel that Mrs. Klassen ignited in the classroom. Every child is delightfully different, bringing various sets of experiences, skills, and ideas to the classroom context.

“Thank you, Aiden, for believing in us.”

About the Presenters

JulieAnn Kniskern is an assistant professor in BU’s Faculty of Education. Children’s literacy development is her teaching specialization and her professional passion. JulieAnn is thrilled to be working with former student Cheryl Klassen in this early years research project.

Cheryl Klassen is passionate about teaching kindergarten in Fort la Bosse School Division. She has been privileged to reunite with her former professor JulieAnn Kniskern to explore writing and technology use with young children. Encouraging her students to create and wonder is a daily priority in her student-centred classroom.