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## Process Drama, Play and Popstars: Integrating Expository Writing Rehearsal Opportunities Across the Day in a Fourth Grade Inclusive Classroom

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## **Introduction**

*“You are now entering Essay Land!” announced Mrs. Topaz with a smile and a sweeping arm gesture as her students entered the classroom after recess. “This new land that you are entering has its own customs, its own celebrations, and its own language! The mayor has invited you -- all of us -- to learn this new language.”*

This article presents a case study of a fourth-grade teacher, Kathy Topaz (all names are pseudonyms), her seventeen students, and the ways that they talked about and rehearsed essay-writing through speech across the school year. With increased focus on informational writing and opinion writing in curriculum and Common Core State Standards (CCSS) across grade levels, Kathy, like most upper elementary teachers, needed to teach her students the five-paragraph essay structure in a grade-appropriate format for upper elementary students.

Starting in September of the year of the study, Kathy intentionally facilitated talking prompts and sentence stems, as well as dramatic and playful activities, as ways to rehearse the structure and content for writing in various genres such as personal narrative, poetry, and – the focus of this article – expository, or essay-writing. These opportunities for facilitated talk occurred daily in purposeful and playful ways across the school day (not just during Writing Workshop), often during Morning Meeting during a time she labeled “Talk Now” or during Interactive Writing, Shared Reading, or between subjects during more informal times. Some of the games Kathy engaged her students in can be referred to as “process drama” (Wells & Sandretto, 2017), where teachers lead students in imagining, playing, and acting out roles in support of exploring key concepts in the curriculum. Other activities were playful in that they encouraged listening to and singing along with music and writing lyrics. In the present study, Kathy’s goal for the students was to explore and practice key concepts of the expository genre and its structure through speech, as rehearsal, before committing their own ideas to paper during independent writing time in Writing Workshop. The focus of this article is Kathy’s facilitation of talk to support essay writing in an inclusive fourth grade class.

## **Literature Review**

There is a significant amount of qualitative research on the role of talk as a form of rehearsal for writing. Much of this research focuses on young children’s learning to write and the ways that learning to speak, read, and write are interconnected (Clay, 2004; Dyson, 1983, 2004, 2006; Ghiso, 2013; Horn, 2005; Myhill & Hines, 2009; Newkirk, 1987; Paley, 2001; Rowe, 2018; Souto-Manning & Martell, 2016).

Clay (2004) explains that the more talk that occurs before writing, the more quickly and easily a young writer can express ideas through writing. Speech, and specifically intentional speech with the purpose of preparing to write, can especially support writing (Galbraith, 2009; Hayes, 2005). Additionally, several researchers highlight ways that early childhood teachers interweave play-based activities with early writing instruction and practice (Dyson, 2004; Ghiso, 2013; Paley, 2001; Rowe, 2018). However, this paper focuses on the role of talk in older children's -- fourth graders' -- rehearsal for writing through talk. In conceptualizing this study and analyzing the data, I draw on literacy research focused on the relationship between speech and writing, elementary classroom discourse, expository writing instruction, and process drama in the elementary literacy classroom.

### **Speech as a Tool for Writing**

As Barnes (1976/1992) has argued, students in school are expected to use final draft speech with all the wrinkles ironed out, an emphasis that tends to produce less talk. Students have fewer opportunities to use speech in exploratory ways, where they can stumble and grope their way toward an idea without worrying about how it sounds as it emerges from their mouths or pens (Smagorinsky, 2013, p.2).

Literacy researchers such as Smagorinsky (2013), have drawn on Vygotsky's (1978) work on speech as a tool to understand the relationship between talk, writing, and learning. Smagorinsky writes about how Vygotsky's theories on speech are still relevant in the educational world today. The usage of "final draft speech" (Barnes, 1976/1992, p. 113) demands that speech be both exact and final, without room for exploration, mistakes, or revision. This emphasis on finality and perfection can lead children to speak less. Engaging in speaking as a generative and creative activity, without worry about perfection, can help in both the production of and clarification of ideas -- ideas that can then be communicated in writing where they can continue to be revised in an iterative process.

Smagorinsky (2013) notes that Vygotsky considers speech to serve two functions: the designative function and the expressive function. When speech functions as designating a fixed and final meaning, the speech becomes a sign, signifying one meaning. On the other hand, the expressive use of speech may function to generate meaning as the speaker thinks new ideas as they are speaking, thus generating new understandings. In this way, speech serves as a tool for formulating ideas and practicing and playing around with a system of ideas (Smagorinsky, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978). Barnes (1976/1992) argues that the designative function of speech has historically ruled in schools, though over the past several decades, the role of speech as an important part of writing rehearsal

has been practiced and emphasized in the research more frequently (Calkins, 1994; Clay, 2004; Dyson, 2003; Myhill & Jones, 2009).

### **Classroom Discourse and Discourse Communities**

It is the talk, or “little d” discourse (Gee, 2005), between teacher and students, and between the students themselves, that helps produce learning opportunities and social statuses in the social space of the classroom. Gee (2005) argues that the “little d” discourse, or talk, drawing, gestures and the like, shapes and is shaped by “big D” Discourses, or worldviews and ways of understanding the world (Gee, 2005). In this way, the classroom talk both reflects and shapes Discourses of writing, including rules for the writing process and ways to self-identify as a writer.

Conversational discourse, or *talk*, therefore, can be considered the mediator through which students learn cultural practices and meanings, including literacy practices (Vygotsky, 1978). Barnes (1976/1992) described his qualitative study of classroom talk in classrooms of various disciplines, observing and analyzing the discourse and interviewing the teachers about their beliefs about teaching. He found that many types of discourse were used in classrooms, and they ranged along a continuum from *transmission* discourse, where teachers tell students what it is they need to know, to *transaction* discourse, where students are asked to interpret understandings from the content through writing, thinking, and talking with peers. Barnes asserted that language was not simply the vehicle for transmitting knowledge to students but the means by which students integrate and construct cultural knowledge. He rejected the common argument that students who struggle in school struggle with language because he saw evidence of them using language in a variety of transactions with teachers and peers. For teaching academic disciplines, he advocated a combination of transmission and transaction forms of discourse.

Teachers and children in a classroom comprise a kind of a discourse community, enacting speech and other forms of discourse in habitual ways over time – such as transmission and transaction – producing patterns of talk that reflect cultural knowledge (Barnes, 1976/1992; Cazden, 1988; Galbraith, 2009; Ghiso, 2013; Wells, 1993). In the case of a writing classroom, the cultural knowledge produced is about what constitutes writing purposes, writing processes, and attributes of writing genres.

### **Expository Genre Writing**

Genres are not simply categories or classes of texts, but they are patterns of rhetorical action that serve communicative purposes (Miller, 1994). The communicative purpose of an exposition, or expository writing, is to explain a

concept to the reader, relating statements to an overarching topic that unifies the paragraph or essay (Newkirk, 1987). This is in contrast to narrative writing, which tells a story, usually with an intentional chronology including a problem and resolution.

Genres and their rules around structure can serve as “keys to understanding how to participate” (Miller, 1984, p.165) in reading or writing a particular kind of text and how to participate in a discourse community of people who read and write these genres. In this way, learning about how various genres of texts are structured gives children a “key” or a way to access the information presented. When they have access to this information and understand the structure through reading and speech, they can better use the structure and produce texts in that genre (Clay, 2004). As students are learning to write in a particular genre -- like narrative and expository -- they appropriate the structure of the genre or sub-genre over time through this interconnection between speech, reading, and writing, so that they can eventually use the structure independently in their writing (Miller, 1994; Newkirk, 1997). Reading and writing go hand in hand, and so improvements in reading comprehension of a genre often occur simultaneously with improved fluency in writing in a genre (Myhill & Jones, 2009). In elementary schools today, and in the CCSS currently used in many states, both narrative and expository (or non-narrative) genres are represented in the writing curriculum and standardized tests (CCSS, 2021). The CCSS most explicitly differentiates between two types of expository texts: opinion and informational.

Newkirk (1987) writes about the divide between literacy researchers claiming that expository writing was too advanced for upper elementary students and the researchers who found evidence of non-narrative and expository speech and writing (in the form of letters, lists, books, etc.) in children’s home literacies and early school literacies. He situates himself with the latter group and argues that competence in exposition develops as students build upon early labelling and list-making. This capability for and proclivity toward labelling and list-making— what he calls the foundation of exposition—starts in early childhood. Older elementary students would also benefit from an emphasis on labeling, list-making, and idea-mapping, setting specific goals around planning, as they learn more about reading and writing expository texts (Hayes, 2009; McLurkin, 2003; Newkirk, 1987; Philippakos, 2020).

## **Process Drama**

Teachers engaging students in drama as part of the curriculum often focus on the process of imagining, improvising, and practicing roles as actors rather than on performing a final product or performance. Thus defined, *process drama* is educational dramatic activity that focus on the process of imagining and acting out

spontaneous scenarios as a way to learn and grapple with ideas and practice skills (Schneider & Jackson, 2000). Wells and Sandretto (2017) emphasize the role of the teacher in process drama, stating that it is “a model of drama in education in which students work within a variety of drama conventions and improvised roles alongside their teacher, who also frequently works in role to guide and structure the drama” (p.182).

Often process drama involves imagining, building, and/or engaging with a fictional world or scenario through multimodalities beyond reading and writing (Schneider & Jackson, 2000; Wells & Sandretto, 2017). For example, engaging in process-related dramatic activities can involve multiple forms of discourse such as speech, drawing, writing, singing, movement, and gesture, with an openness to, and encouragement of, play and improvisation as a part of the interactions. Schneider and Jackson (2000) present a classroom in which the teacher uses process drama as a part of both content area instruction and writing instruction. The scenarios developed by the teacher in conversation with her students involved creating a *peace team* to bring peace, as defined by them, to different human and animal communities. This curriculum involved writing as a part of the process drama, such as advertisements, letters, scripts, and descriptions that aided their dramatic exploration.

Wells and Sandretto (2017) detail a process drama curriculum in science with seven- and eight-year-olds in which they developed an imaginary world of cats and birds of species native to New Zealand. With an objective of understanding how native birds were being killed in droves by domestic cats, their curriculum involved imagining a world of pet cats. Findings showed that students developed their abilities as text readers and users, and as writers, through participating in process drama activities. They were able to draw on textual resources to debate the roles of cats and birds in their local ecosystem. The authors found that teachers did not feel confident in facilitating process drama and suggested that integration of drama and arts-related activities be part of preservice teacher preparation and professional development.

## **Methods**

This study extends from a larger ethnographic study of talk about writing, reading and the production of literate identities through discourse in an inclusive fourth grade classroom. This case study employed ethnographic research methods (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Heath & Street, 2008) and took place in an urban elementary school with students ranging from kindergarten to fifth grade, in a neighborhood where the median income was below the poverty level, in a large northeast city in the United States. The present study was designed to explore the following research questions in one fourth-grade inclusive classroom:

- 1) What curricular opportunities are present for engagement with rehearsal for writing?
- 2) How do a teacher and her students engage with process drama as a way to rehearse writing?

I visited the classroom at least two mornings each week for the entire 2011-2012 school year. While this data is nearly ten years old at the time of this article's publication, the findings and implications are still relevant for today's teachers because upper elementary grade teachers across New York State and the United States continue to be required to teach the expository genre according to the CCSS. This portrait of a classroom offers timely possibilities for innovative and robust writing instruction for current teachers, literacy specialists, curriculum developers and administrators.

I was an observer participant (Dyson & Genishi, 2005), taking notes and audio recording in the back of the room during the Morning Meeting and literacy block but also smiling, chatting and helping pass out papers when and if it was needed between subjects. The students seemed to grow comfortable with me there, or so many of them told me, and invited me to stay for math and specials so they could show me their projects frequently.

### **The Teacher Participant**

Kathy identified as a White, middle-class woman who lived outside the neighborhood of the school. She had been teaching for about five years at the time of the study and had completed her master's degree as a literacy specialist. She was a grade-level leader and expressed much dedication to working in schools serving children and families experiencing poverty and had passion for drawing upon multimodalities in her pursuit of creating inclusive education.

Kathy, teacher of a fourth-grade class labeled by the school as an "inclusion" class, had children with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) on the roster. Kathy worked toward inclusion by facilitating positive peer relationships and teaching for all students' academic growth and success. As the researcher, I previously worked with Kathy as her field supervisor for a graduate study internship and also a professor of an action-research graduate level course, so I knew that she had a strong interest in inclusive education as a social process involving curricular and discursive action. I also knew she was integrating art, social studies, and drama with her literacy instruction. After hearing about my study, she and the principal agreed to have me observe two days a week, for about four hours at a time, which I did for one full school year (September to June).

### **The School and Class**

Among the Inquiry School's (pseudonym) 500 students, 71% were Latino/a, 22% African American or recent African immigrants, 2% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 1% White, 1% Asian, and 2% students of other ethnicities. Ninety-five percent of the student body was eligible for free and reduced lunch, while 22% received special education services and 17% were English language learners (ELLs).

Kathy had about seventeen students in her class for the year, with two students leaving, and two more joining the class. The demographics of the class were similar to the demographics of the school. In her class, there were about nine girls and eight boys. Three of the students had repeated a grade. The reading levels in the class ranged from Fountas & Pinnell level C to Level S in the beginning of the school year. Three students in the class had IEPs and four were ELLs.

### **Researcher Positionality**

My experiences and identity influence the topic, theoretical framing, and methodologies I have chosen for this study. Like Kathy, I am a White, middle class teacher who began my teaching career as a second and third grade teacher in the same city and neighborhood in which I engaged in this research and the school was using similar curricula in terms of reading and writing workshop. I, too, experienced many complexities, worries, responsibilities, joys, and pressures of being a classroom teacher in an era of progressive education and high-stakes testing. As a college professor, educational researcher, and student teaching field supervisor, I continue to be interested in these complexities and the creative and multimodal ways that teachers support elementary students in writing, reading, speaking and listening while also adhering to testing requirements.

### **Expository Writing Curriculum**

A Writing Workshop curriculum was the required curriculum at the Inquiry School. The Writing Workshop model involved units that introduced and explored various genres of writing, including personal narrative, expository/informational writing, expository/opinion writing, fiction narrative, poetry and other sub- and combined genres. Approximately one new writing unit was taught each month. Kathy used a workshop lesson structure for the hour-long writing workshop time each day, which started with a lesson introduction, teacher demonstration, guided practice, independent writing time, and sharing time. The expository writing units occurred starting in November with personal essays, then December with persuasive essays, and then January and February with literary essays (See Table 1). In March and April, Kathy and the students were preparing for the standardized tests which



included expository writing prompts. Finally, at the end of the year, students engaged in informational writing.

**Table 1**

*Units of Study for Reading Workshop in the 2011-2012 School Year*

| <b>Month</b> | <b>Reading Workshop</b>                      | <b>Writing Workshop</b>    |
|--------------|--|----------------------------|
| September    | Strengthening Our Reading Muscles            | Personal Narratives        |
| October      | Walking in Our Characters' Shoes             | Realistic Fiction          |
| November     | Exploring Non-Fiction: Expository Texts      | Personal Essays            |
| December     | Exploring Non-Fiction: Persuasive Texts      | Persuasive Essays          |
| January      | Thematic Text Sets                           | Literary Essays            |
| February     | Reading Poetry to Interpret Fiction          | Literary Essays & Poetry   |
| March        | Test Preparation                             | Test Preparation           |
| April        | Test Preparation & Fantasy                   | Test Preparation & Fantasy |
| May          | Fantasy                                      | Fantasy                    |
| June         | Reading in the Content Areas: Social Studies | Informational Writing      |

Beyond Writing Workshop, Morning Meeting and Reading Workshop lessons and activities greatly supported the genre learning and rehearsal process for writing. For instance, in Morning Meeting, students were invited to share personal stories from their lives orally, and then Kathy would refer back to these stories when it came time to write personal narratives during Writing Workshop time. She called the talking time during Morning Meeting “Talk Now” and offered prompts to the student daily. During Talk Now, Kathy sometimes also prompted students to offer opinions and “reasons why” they had that opinion. These opportunities for talk served as rehearsal time for thinking through the ideas they would later commit to paper during Writing Workshop. Reading workshop units usually correlated with writing units in terms of genre and focus.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

For this study of talk supporting expository writing, and specifically rehearsal of ideas in preparation for writing, I employed ethnographic data collection methods

of observation, document collection, and interviews (Heath & Street, 2008). The documents I collected included teacher lesson plans, student writing samples, charts and graphic organizers, and curriculum guides. The purpose of collecting these documents was to understand the writing curriculum as well as students' engagement with the curriculum through their writing. I also audio-recorded Kathy and her students' talk about reading and writing each time I was there (Heath & Street, 2008; Stake, 2006) as well as taking field notes in my researchers' journal, separating my description of events from my interpretations. I then transcribed the classroom talk and interviews. The purpose of interviewing Kathy and the students about their experiences in writing workshop was to understand the participants' interpretations of expository writing processes.

To analyze the data, I combined thematic analysis and D/discourse analysis to explore how Kathy and the students spoke about writing before enacting writing through pencil-to-paper engagement. Thematic analysis involved first indexing and coding my field notes, interview and transcripts, and artifacts (Maxwell, 1996). In order to index the data, I isolated and ordered relevant episodes of interaction during literacy events and interviews for reference (Barton, 1994; Reissman, 2008). I assigned the same episodes several index terms if they connected with several potential concepts. These concepts, derived from the theoretical framework and arrived at inductively based on the activities of the classroom, were labeled as "codes" (Maxwell, 1996).

Whereas thematic analysis focuses on the topics addressed in the data, D/discourse analysis (Gee, 2005) focuses more on the discursive structures surrounding how the meaning is communicated. When I transcribed short portions of text on which to do D/discourse analysis, I called these portions "speech events" (Gee, 2005). As I interpreted the data, I drew on Gee's "building tasks" (2005, pp. 11-12) posed in question format, in order to think about how the participants used language to rehearse writing and learn about the expository genre. Two "building task" questions I used to conduct D/discourse analysis were, "What activity or activities is this piece of language being used to enact?" and "What identity or identities is this piece of language being used to enact?" (pp. 11-12). The focus of the D/discourse analysis for this study, then, centered on how language is used in a classroom to enact writing.

As I composed this piece, I attempted to characterize the classroom life using "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of particular moments and days from my field notes, including what the classroom looked and sounded like. I identified types of lessons and verbal interactions that seemed to be patterns for Kathy and her students, and thus I noticed repeated patterns in the kinds of talk Kathy used to prepare her students for writing essays.

## **Findings**

To present the following findings I have narrativized literacy events that I observed and audio recorded from Kathy's fourth grade classroom. Although these narratives present details of the specific discursive interactions of the moment, these particular examples represent the repeated types of lessons and interactions that Kathy and her students frequently engaged in. The findings present ways that Kathy built in opportunities for students to learn about, play with, and communicate using an expository genre structure.

### **Building on Students' Informal Talk During Morning Meeting**

As she did every single morning that I observed, Kathy played the song "A beautiful morning" by the Rascals (1968) while everyone put away their coats and bags and organized their notebooks and supplies. When the song finished, as Kathy had taught them, students brought their homework folders to the rug so she could check the homework. While she checked it, she instructed the students to speak with the person next to them about a book they had recently read and enjoyed or speak about what they wanted to read. "Tell your partner WHY you liked the book or want to read the book," she would say. She told them that their conversation could be about a book at any level, meaning that the students did not have to speak about a book on their own independent reading level, and the students were allowed to talk about comic books, magazines, or whatever other reading material interested them.

An example of this kind of informal conversation about reading occurred between two boys next to me, Jorge and Daniel. The boys were discussing a *Dragon Ball Z* comic they had both taken out of the school library recently. They were pointing out pictures of Gohan, a main character whose hair had become spiky when he became a teenager over the course of the series.

David noted to Jorge that "His hair is spiky like his dad's... he's getting more powerful – see?"

David pointed to Gohan's muscles. This was not a leveled book, yet the boys were discussing the characters and building a friendship based on common interests.

"I liked this book because of the dope illustrations," Jorge told David.

"Let me see your drawings of him," David replied, and they opened his notebook.

"Remember you can always recommend books to your classmates, leaving them a note in our 'Recommendations' basket! Make sure to give at least one reason WHY you are recommending it," Kathy told students.

David got up to get a "recommendations" sheet from the basket and wrote to another student, Alex, about the *Dragon Ball Z* book. He wrote, "read this book because the pictures are cool and your (sic) a good draw-er."

This book recommendation activity was an invitation to students to participate in building a supportive classroom community of readers, fostering the idea that a purpose for reading was to enjoy and learn from texts in each other's company. This was also an invitation to students to practice using the academic language of "because" to support their assertion with a "reason why" – a skill needed for expository writing.

Kathy interwove talk about reading and books frequently in the Morning Meeting, along with inviting students to offer their opinions and "reasons why." Sometimes Kathy asked the students to share books with each other, and at other times she asked the students to make connections between the books they read during Read Aloud and events in students' lives or current events in the larger community. Multiple Discourses were represented in their talk, ranging from Discourses of accountability to Discourses of writing essays and Discourses of social inclusion and community.

### **The Morning Meeting and "Talk Now": Structured Speaking Prompts**

After Kathy checked homework and students shared a book they liked, Kathy would start the official Morning Meeting by introducing the day's "greeting." Kathy felt it was important that students greet each other every single morning, and that each person feel welcomed into the classroom space to start the day in a friendly way and also teach students the social skills involved in greeting people. Examples of greetings included Kathy instructing students to greet the person next to them using eye contact, saying their name, and using a special handshake, gesture, or dance.

A specific example of a classroom greeting was a structured speaking prompt when each person was directed to give a compliment to another person and then give three reasons why they gave the compliment. Below is an example of a compliment that Kathy gave to one of the students in her class in December. She modeled the instructions for the day's "greeting" and also connected the "greeting" with the reading and writing units with which students would be engaging.

**Kathy:** I'd like to prepare you to enter the magical world of Essay Land later today. People in Essay Land talk in main ideas and supporting details. You're going to use your 'essayist's fingers' where you put your hand like this with your pointer and tall fingers together and your ring finger and pinkie together. With your thumb, now it looks like you have three fingers. (*see Figure 1*)

Do any of you know the "Vulcan Salute" from Star Trek? It's kind of like that. [*No one raised their hand.*]

When you say the main compliment, or the main idea, point to your palm, and then for each of the three reasons why, point to one of the three fingers. For example, Isabella is very creative. That is my compliment. She knows that it is okay to be herself and to be different. She writes stories that are fascinating and funny and deep, like the one about the zebra she read to the class. She is artistic -- just look at the collages on her notebook covers.

Once Kathy finished her compliment, the students went around the room, giving each other compliments and supporting their compliments with three “reasons why.” Kathy then told students that learning to talk with their “essayist fingers” might help them for many reasons. It would help them convince someone of something, it might help them grow ideas about their books because pushing oneself to think of three reasons might spark a new way about thinking of something. It might help them write clearer essays because this is the structure of essays. Also, she added, giving honest compliments would help their classmates feel valued in the community.

**Figure 1**

*“Welcome to Essay Land” Hand Gesture Kathy Called “Essayist Fingers”*



Kathy encouraged her students to note each other’s strengths— thus building community— while also foreshadowing a skill she would ask students to use when writing essays, thereby linking Morning Meeting with Writing Workshop skills. Throughout this practice, she evoked a Discourse of standards in that essay writing was a requirement of the fourth grade CCSS, and also a Discourse of inclusion as she emphasized students’ recognition of each other’s personalities and skills.

The “Talk Now” portion of Morning Meeting was a daily occurrence the entire year. Kathy would either give students a topic to talk about, or she would ask students for suggestions of what to talk about. For instance, some of the Talk Now questions Kathy asked students were, “What is your favorite season and why?” Or “What is an important improvement we could make at our school and why?” She would guide them to speak in “Essay” language and tap on their “essayist’s fingers” to show a main idea and supporting details. She asked students for ideas for the talk prompts as the year continued. One student suggested the topic, “Why do people join gangs?” and the class spent several weeks discussing this topic during Morning Meeting, as well as reading children’s books that addressed the topic.

The “Talk Now” cycle typically spanned three days for each new topic, though the discussion on gangs in the school neighborhood extended longer than that, with multiple 3-day rotations on sub-topics. On the first day of the cycle, students talked with a partner about the topic. On the second day, two partnerships—usually four people—teamed up to talk about the topic. On the third day, the whole class discussed the topic. The idea was that by the time the whole group discussed the topic, every individual had been given enough time to think of their responses, and therefore, everyone, whether they preferred talking in small groups or large, had cultivated ideas and participated in the final discussion. While Talk Now was a part of the Morning Meeting, the work done there supported work that Kathy and students did during the Writing Workshop (and Reading Workshop).

### **Interactive Writing: Collaborative Production of a Mission Statement**

I highlight Interactive Writing because of the ways Kathy interwove reading practices with writing practices during this typical portion of the balanced literacy curriculum. In her classroom, she often had students compose paragraphs *with* her, together as a class, and then practice reading them, evaluating them, and revising them. She called this Interactive Writing, and while she mostly held the pen, she invited students to say the ideas that they thought she should write. She told students that while participating in Interactive Writing, they could observe how to write a paragraph or a particular kind of response or sentence. She also had students read the composition chorally or in groups after it was written, to think about how to revise and edit, and to celebrate the process and final product together by discussing what “worked well” in their product and process, thereby showing the joint relationship between reading and writing.

The following is an example of an Interactive Writing lesson that integrated both reading and writing with classroom community building. Kathy had asked students to share what profession they wanted to enter when they grew up. Each student shared ideas about their individual career aspirations, and Kathy wrote them down. Together, they decided which category each career fell into: sports, animals,

leaders, and helping people. Kathy and the students discussed how some professions fell into several categories, like doctors, who, the class decided, fell into both the “leaders” category and the “helping people” category.

When she had collected information about what everyone in the class’s interests were, she said, “I think we need a class mission statement, sort of like a company mission statement. We will state our goals so that we can look back at them to stay focused and encourage each other. Are we ready to make our mission statement?”

Then, she modeled for them how to write a topic sentence for each category and organize the paragraphs. She left some spelling, organization, and editing errors in the draft for students to find and fix. Then, for the next several days, she led the students in reading the writing sample over and over again, as a Shared Reading activity, and in revising their paragraph several more times (see Figure 2).

The interactive writing artifact that Kathy and students wrote together follows:

**Figure 2**

*Students’ Career Aspirations Interactive Writing Artifact*

|   |
|---|
| <p>The bright students in room 4-11* have high hopes. We would like to be football players, basketball players, baseball players and wrestlers.</p> <p>We would like to help animals, be veterinarians, and work for animal control.</p> <p>We would like to run schools and be principals. Others would like to run the country and be presidents.</p> <p>We would like to be clothing designers and artists.</p> <p>We would like to be doctors and keep people safe in the army.</p> |
|---|

She coached students, “It is important to read with gusto. Read with confidence. Enunciate your words, and read slowly. Pretend you are presenting this essay, this mission statement, to an audience of your biggest fans. This says we have high hopes! Show a hopeful and confident attitude with your voice!”

This is an example of Kathy talking about writing in several ways at once. Here, her talk about the writing centered on the style in which they spoke the words, as in how they read with expression. She also talked about the content of what they had written and how to organize the topics using an expository structure. She made the connection between the content and how she wanted students to embrace their differences and yet support each other, thus producing what counted as being a “good” learner and classroom citizen. She highlighted the structure of having a topic sentence and many supporting details or “reasons why.” They read this class mission statement essay daily for many days, sometimes chorally, and sometimes individuals would read it for the class. Interactive Writing and Shared Reading

became tools through which to model and teach reading and writing strategies related to the curriculum and also to read and compose texts that connected to students' lives and the community she hoped to create.

### **Welcome to Essay Land: Students Enter the Imaginary Discursive Space**

After a few months of Talk Now and morning meeting opportunities to hone their academic language in support of the expository structure (like stating a main idea and supporting details, and using the word “because”), Kathy introduced the process drama scenario of Essay Land—imagining traveling to a new land with new people, a new language, and a fantastic mayor. One day in November, as the class was starting the personal essay unit, she created a fanfare when they came back into the room after specials.

“You are now entering Essay Land!” announced Mrs. Topaz with a smile and a sweeping arm gesture as her students entered the classroom after recess. “This new land that you are entering has its own customs, its own celebrations, and its own language! You will be invited to learn this new language. Welcome to Essay Land!”

The children began whispering, and quickly took their places on the big blue rug meeting area. Kathy was wearing a top hat, wearing winter gloves, as part of her costume. She sat down on the rug with the children, next to a large chart paper with the “mayor of Essay Land” also wearing a top hat. The “mayor” in the picture had three fingers on each hand (see Figure 3).

#### **Figure 3**

*The Welcoming Mayor of “Essay Land” With 3 Fingers on Each Hand*



When she introduced “Essay Land”, she invited students to “enter and learn the language, because the Mayor invited them and knew they would be awesome Essay



Land citizens.” This method of engaging students in process drama and talk before having them write essays prepared a framework on which to draw when they began putting pen to paper in later parts of the writing cycle. By inviting them to engage in curriculum drama around Essay Land, she also invited them to what Gee (2005) would call a “discourse community,” where each member learns the ways of speaking, acting, and thinking of that particular community, and thus becomes fluent in the discourse and can take on the identity of being part of the community.

She invited students to begin planning their personal essays by “speaking the language” to their partner and using “essayist fingers.” I sat near Jorge and Daniel again. They each raised their “essayist hands” into the gesture where it looked like the Vulcan Salute from *Star Trek*. They also adopted a robot-like voice and started their planning.

Jorge said, “*Garfield* is my favorite show” while pointing to his palm, where one points when one says the “main idea” in “essay language.”

Then he pointed to each of his “three essayist fingers” one at a time while saying, “First, he likes lasagna and is funny about it. Then, he is lazy and so am I sometimes. Finally, he has fun with Otis the dog.”

Daniel responded, “Awesome! Here’s mine. I love football. You have to run fast. You have to throw far. You might get tackled but you have fans cheering for you.”

Daniel, too, pointed to his palm while stating each of the three reasons why he loved football. The students picked up how to plan out their essays by “speaking in Essay” very quickly. Kathy invited them to state several possible topics for their personal essay based on their interests, and practice stating the three reasons why. After speaking these ideas, she assigned them to write down their main ideas and supporting details using bullets in their notebook. Both Daniel and Jorge, and the other children, were able to begin to outline their essays without hesitation after speaking their ideas first.

### **Shared Reading: How Would a Popstar Speak in “Essay” Language?**

During the unit on literary essays in January— a unit that bridged Reading Workshop and Writing Workshop— Kathy played the song “Firework” by Katy Perry (2010) for the class. She wrote the lyrics down on chart paper, and students read and sang them together. Moving on from identifying a main idea and supporting “reasons why,” she emphasized the introduction of the song, or the hook, and also literary language in the song. These are elements of songs and also elements of essays. She pointed out that Katy Perry started her “essay,” or her song, with questions to hook the reader into reading, or listening. She started with the words, “Do you ever feel like a plastic bag drifting through the wind, wanting to

start again?” Kathy explained that a songwriter was a sort of essay writer, who often started a song or an essay by piquing his or her reader’s interest.

This Shared Reading text and discussion served several purposes: 1) The words and music of the text provided them with an encouraging message about their worth; 2) Kathy highlighted writing strategies through the Shared Reading that she would be teaching students to do in their own writing; 3) The shared experience of listening, reading, and singing the song together created an opportunity for interacting together, playing, interpreting, and improvising that seemed to engage all students. Students would continue to sing this song and dance to this song throughout the year. Kathy also engaged students in studying lyrics to other songs as well—through Shared Reading—and so students read, sang and studied lyrics from “A beautiful morning” (Rascals, 1968), “Friday” (Black, 2011), and several other songs. They noted how some songs could be interpreted as having the structure and attributes of personal essays or persuasive essays. She also encouraged students to write songs during recess and during unofficial moments of the day—and then discussed the songs they wrote and performed to gauge whether students saw the genre structures of their songs.

### **Discussion**

The findings focus on Kathy’s integration of talking prompts and process drama activities through Morning Meeting, Interactive Writing, Shared Reading, and Writing Workshop, specifically in the support of students’ development as essay writers. She used these to engage students in studying the structure of essays and for rehearsal of ideas for essay writing. In the case of the present article, the teacher and students produce a writing discourse community through their talk and interactions with the expository structure—a community in which each member learns rules and structures for essay writing while also speaking and writing in playful and creative ways. The discourse community also, I argue, becomes what Gee (2005) would call a “big D” Discourse community in that each member learned the ways to interact so as to produce expository speech and written communication in an academic setting, as well as learning, practicing, and repeating ways of interacting in the classroom that ultimately made them “members” of the classroom. The students learned the Discourse of essay writing and one could also say they learned the Discourse of academic language and a Discourse of inclusion, where all students were given access to engaging and challenging curriculum.

In this way, Kathy broadened what counted as writing and reading beyond linear traditional text-based practices and created more opportunities for students’ engagement with multiple sign systems. “Play” during literacy, in the form of improvisation, listening to music and studying lyrics, making up dances and songs, and participating in the process drama of “Essay Land” were more acceptable

during Morning Meeting, Shared Reading, and Interactive Writing at her school than during Writing Workshop or Reading Workshop time. Yet these influenced the Writing Workshop (and Reading Workshop) time. This idea of play in the literacy curriculum enabled students to improvise and experiment with reading, writing, singing, and acting, and interacting with peers in ways that interwove academic and social inclusion while enhancing each component of balanced literacy. This kind of talk contrasted with prevalent curricula around test preparation, which focused on producing correct answers to questions posed by teachers and test-makers. Yet, this play still supported the acquisition of the academic language and skills the students needed while also building community and supporting students' creativity, engagement and literate identities.

The facilitated talk prompts during Morning Meeting, Interactive Writing, Shared Reading, and Writing Workshop helped students become what Luke & Freebody (1997) call "code breakers" of the system, or structure for, expository genre writing. The term "code-breaker" has often been used in the context of reading, as in, breaking the code of phonics to understand that letters make particular sounds that, when blended together, make words. In the present study, which is focused on writing instruction and acquiring a Discourse of essay writing, "breaking the code" of the expository, or "essay," genre occurred through facilitated speech and process drama as well as through studying written texts of the same genre. Sandretto and Tilson (2016) wrote that code-breakers are "developing understanding[s] of the codes and conventions of all the semiotic systems and how they may be operating in any given text" (p. 4). Becoming part of a D/discourse community of essay-speakers and essay-writers involves the process of "breaking the code" of essay discourse and using that code through speech and writing.

There are several limitations to the study. Data was derived from a larger ethnographic study of both reading and writing in one classroom over a school year, and therefore the sample size was limited to one context, one teacher, and one class. However, attention to discourse in one classroom over a year's time allowed me to attend to the contextualized interactions produced by Kathy and her students and then compose a detailed account of classroom practice that could provide a model for educators in the field looking to engage their students in writing. Also, the data is nearly ten years old, which could be seen as a limitation. Yet, teachers in today's educational climate are still tasked with teaching the expository genre, especially in grades 3 and up, and will be evaluated according to their ability to teach expository writing to diverse students with varying academic and social needs.

Expository writing structures are also often incorporated into content area instruction in social studies, science and mathematics and support understanding of the content (Hochman & Wexler, 2017). Therefore teachers, curriculum designers and teacher educators working on integrating literacy in the content areas would

benefit from incorporating more rehearsal opportunities for writing using an expository structure. Additionally, the genre of expository writing –informational and persuasive writing— begins in K-2 curriculum in most states (Rowe, 2018) and those teachers may find that the integration of speech, reading, writing, and multimodal process drama to be an example of developmentally appropriate practice that advances students’ literacy knowledge, content knowledge, and social orientation to the world (Dyson, 2003; Ghiso, 2013; Horn, 2005).

Thus, my goal in presenting this account of Kathy teaching expository writing rehearsal through the school year is that it will give K-12 teachers, curriculum designers, curriculum evaluators, instructional coaches and administrators, examples, and “thinking tools” (Moen, 2006, p.9) for imagining and enacting standards-based, inclusively-oriented, multimodal writing instruction that sets up students for success as writers and communicators. Additionally, the article illustrates that teachers can make explicit connections for students among speaking, writing, *and reading* expository texts, thus helping students to develop their reading comprehension skills as well as their speaking and writing skills (Graham & Harris, 2018). Educators tasked with evaluating literacy curricula could assess writing curricula to determine if ample opportunities for rehearsal of ideas are present—through speech and process drama, as well as through note-taking structures and graphic organizers. Such opportunities for rehearsal, planning, and revision would increase students’ opportunities for engagement and practice with the process.

### **Conclusion**

With the goals of helping elementary students learn the rules of expository writing as having a main idea and supporting details or reasons and gaining entry or membership into the discourse community of expository writers, Kathy engaged students in “playing around” discursively with the essay structure in a lower-stakes manner through speech and process drama. After participating in these rehearsal activities that Kathy incorporated throughout the school day over the school year, each of her seventeen students went on to draft many three- to five-paragraph essays using pen to paper, drawing on their understandings of the essay structure. Students each wrote daily expository paragraphs as well as many as four to eight essays. As children gained experience with the expository structure, their identities as capable members of the writing discourse community and their abilities as expository writers grew.

Talking through ideas and writing organized notes can help writers grapple with what they want to say and make a plan for what to include in a first draft of writing (Dyson, 2003; Galbraith, 2009; Myhill & Jones, 2009). The word “essay” comes from the French root “to try” or, to try out one’s thinking. May teachers—myself included— take on Kathy’s spirit of experiment and play as we encourage

students to “try out” thinking through both speech and writing, thus growing not only their skills but also their confidence to play with, share, revise, and clarify their ideas in community.

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