

# Children's Struggles with the Writing Process

## Exploring Storytelling, Visual Arts, and Keyboarding to Promote Narrative Story Writing

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### Introduction

The writing process can pose real challenges for some children. As a special education consultant teacher at an elementary school, in the Toronto (Ontario) area from 1994-2002, I (Michael) worked with many students who demonstrated difficulties with writing. Sally, a fourth-grade student receiving special education services, was one example. She demonstrated real difficulty with generating a story idea; even after dialoguing with me about her favorite interests and activities, she could not easily make a decision.

At one session, I suggested that she write about her favorite television program. In trying to compose the text, Sally spent so much of her mental energy trying to spell the words that she had little energy left to devote to idea progression and story structure. With my role as a special education consultant teacher for students like Sally, I was motivated to generate an alternative narrative story-writing strategy that would help students who struggle with writing. This prompted me to become a professor and researcher of literacy skills and strategies. I theorized that, if students who struggle with writing could note their initial story ideas in a format other than words, they would have the metacognitive skills to know how to manage the process of describing story characters, setting, the main event, and drawing a cohesive conclusion.

At Home At School (AHAS) is an arts-based/integrated-curriculum literacy program that provided an opportunity to employ my alternative-strategy idea with

elementary-aged students who found writing to be a challenge. In 2002, Susan Finley introduced AHAS with 25 students and 12 student teachers; in 2009, AHAS enrolled over 500 K-12 students and 30 university students, most of whom are preservice teachers. The purpose of the AHAS umbrella of programs is to provide equity and opportunity to all children who face systemic roadblocks to education. Program documents state:

Our charge is to provide opportunities for children challenged by such roadblocks to feel At Home At School: that is, we seek to provide comfortable and secure learning environments that promote active learning for all children. (Finley, 2009)

### *The Challenges Faced by Students Who Struggle with Writing*

Composing text is an essential skill for students. Assignments, tests, and emailing are a few examples of the many tasks which require students to generate thoughts and put them into prose. For many students, choosing a topic, creating an outline, generating an initial draft, and making edits to produce a final copy is a fluid process which poses minimal difficulty. For students who struggle with composing text, the writing process can be an arduous challenge which often results in frustration and a final copy which is lower in quality than standards dictate.

To produce a publishable story that fits the expectations of logical sequence of events that move forward through the conventions of rising action to crisis and climax and final resolution, students need to demonstrate command of writing practices such as idea generation, grammar, paragraphing, and story structure (Dockrell, Lindsay, Connelly, & Mackie, 2007; Polloway, Patton, & Serna, 2005).

Students who struggle with writing often experience difficulty with how to plan a story (McCutchen, 2006). Although the teacher may have provided one or even a

few examples, this is probably insufficient for students who have had little or no past success in the writing process (Foorman, 2007). Not knowing how to create a story plan impedes the writing process because the required characters, locations, descriptions, and sequence of events need to be presented cohesively so as to demonstrate the idea of story structure and to hold the reader's interest.

Beginning writers may have ideas to include in a story plan yet struggle with the demanding task of the visual-motor integration process of manuscript printing or handwriting and, therefore, have little mental energy to retain or develop their story ideas (Berninger, Richards, Stock, Abbott, Trivedi, Altemeier, et al., 2008; McCutchen, 2006). The brain's memory and motor functions must work in tandem to help the student define the words to be written in a logical order, with correct spelling, and to convey the intended meaning and ideas.

Even with a good idea and plan, a student's lack of knowledge about proper sentence structure and syntax can hinder the creation of fluid and elaborate text. The result is a strenuous editing task where the student's interest can wane and leave the potentially strong composition in a stage of illegibility. The student may be able to note ideas but not in a way that conveys the story to the reader.

Children's demographic characteristics can also impact their abilities with writing: family income and socio-economic status (which goes beyond income to include parental education and other indicators of social status) are probable factors. Researchers have demonstrated that children from low-income families may experience unique difficulties with their performance in school (Grundmann, 1997; O'Connor & Spreen, 1988) and socio-economic demographics have been correlated with vocabulary development (Hart and Risley, 1995).

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Students living in poverty often experience fewer literacy activities within the home (e.g., access to books and games) and fewer opportunities for out-of-school educational experiences (e.g., high quality, center-based childcare, as well as enrichments such as visiting local museums, family vacations, etc.); lack of access to high quality summer educational experiences can be especially detrimental to these students (Borman, Goetz, & Dowling, 2007; Schacter & Booil, 2005; Terzian, Moore, & Hamilton, 2009).

Thus, socioeconomic contexts and depressed income status can result in students' having a less-developed vocabulary and experience with other pre-requisite literacy skills which schools demand as a precursor for academic learning. While all students could benefit from writing-skills strategy practice, participation in a summer program may be especially beneficial to students from lower socio-economic and low income populations (Chin & Phillips, 2004; Kim, 2004).

#### Strategies for Struggling Writers

A variety of strategies and activities exist to address areas of concern for struggling writers. In their book *Writing Better*, Graham and Harris (2005) offered a number of strategies to help students with a variety of tasks from composing a letter to the editor to narrative story writing. To help students include the key components to a narrative story, Graham and Harris created the WWW, W=2, H=2 strategy which lists a series of seven questions to prompt students to think about what they could include in a story:

- (1) Who is the main character; who else is in the story?
- (2) When does the story take place?
- (3) Where does the story take place?
- (4) What does the main character do; what do the other characters want to do?
- (5) What happens when the main character tries to do it?
- (6) How does the story end?
- (7) How does the main character feel; how do the others feel? (28)

Saddler, Moran, Graham, and Harris (2004) incorporated this strategy along with Plan, Organize, and Write (POW) and found that students produced more elaborate stories when given explicit instruction in how to plan a story and when focusing on what key elements to include. Focused practice on creating sentences and merging simple into combined sentences can also be beneficial for students learning to write (Graham, Harris, & MacArthur, 2006; Saddler, Behforooz, & Asaro, 2008).

Offering students a step-by-step format and the opportunity to practice managing their own writing process can help struggling writers improve in composing elaborate text.

In the program described here, art materials such as modeling clay, paints, markers, and crayons were made available as an option in the pre-writing phase as a means for students to note their story ideas visually before facing the possibly laborious task of story writing. Hobson (2002) advocated that the use of images could help promote children's writing given that pictures are more compact and efficient storage units of ideas in the pre-writing phase.

In our multimedia age, images are often combined with text (i.e., web pages, newspaper stories, television, and videos) (Fleckenstein, 2002; Flood & Lapp, 1997). Researchers (e.g., Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997; Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996; Olshansky, 2006) suggest that art offers students a means to illustrate story ideas as a way to complement the actual text. Fu and Shelton (2007) concluded that providing struggling writers with a means to illustrate initial story ideas helped to promote their confidence, stamina, and writing skills.

Within this study, as a supplement to arts-based notation in the planning phase of writing, students were provided writing-assistance software (e.g., CoWriter:SOLO; Don Johnston Developmental Equipment, 1992) to assist students to transpose their illustrated story ideas into text (Van Leeuwen & Gabriel, 2007). Thus, students in the Thirsty Thinkers Workshop were given multiple supports for strategizing and writing their stories for classroom publication. These supportive strategies included careful attention to modeling by reading stories before planning, followed by arts-based planning activities, and culminating with technology-based support to eliminate some of the struggles of writing mechanics.

For this study, the research question and analysis focus was: after reviewing a published story example, how do elementary-age students employ the use of art and writing-assistance software in planning and composing their own narrative text?

### Context of the Study

#### Key Players and Design of the At Home At School Program

Susan and Michael are both education faculty at Washington State University. We share a common interest in helping students improve in literacy skills. In 2002,

Susan initiated At Home At School as a no-fee arts-based/integrated-curriculum summer literacy program for students from low-income families, shelters, and transitional housing to improve academic skills and school connectedness by providing access to empowerment curriculum, as well as high-quality instruction and educational opportunities.

The At Home At School curriculum design introduced by Susan is based in the concepts of empowerment and democratic education and utilizes hands-on and arts-integrated learning approaches in all of its programs (Finley, 2003; Finley, 2007, Washington State University, 2009). Teachers in AHAS programs are guided by the educational theories conceptualized in the works of Paulo Freire, author of the widely referenced *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/2007).

During the first two years, the program existed only in shelter and homeless community housing where overcrowding became a problem. Susan established a collegial partnership with local school districts to continue the summer program and At Home At School moved into empty elementary schools during summer. SHARE, a non-profit organization providing shelter, food and emergency services, provides United States Department of Agriculture funded free/reduced lunches to the school site and transports homeless children to the school sites during summer.

Students from the host school and children of volunteers also attended the program in order to create a balanced or representative learning community. Homeless children are guaranteed enrollment in any of the programs under the At Home At School umbrella, including both summer and school year programs. (See <http://www.AtHomeAtSchool.org> for more complete descriptions of At Home At School Summer, Outdoor Education and Environmental Science, Foster Transitions to Higher Education, and other At Home At School projects. At Home At School is also a recognized partner of the International Institute of Qualitative Inquiry.)

The summer program represented here was offered to students (N=212) at an elementary school in the southwest region of Washington State. Master's-in-Teaching students at Washington State University Vancouver served as the "teachers" in the program. Each teacher was assigned a group of eight to ten students for pre- and post-session activities. At the beginning of each weekday morning during the four-week program, students would arrive

and participate in community-building activities (e.g. games, discussions and art projects that compose one aspect of the empowerment curriculum of AHAS). They would eat breakfast provided in partnership by the free and reduced meals provider, and then each child would choose two 75-minute activity sessions in which to participate until lunch time. During sessions, teachers led activities and/or assisted children in the program.

Classes and workshops available to the students were constructivist in nature. Teacher-led activity centers included theatre (writing, editing, production), video storytelling, visual arts studio, newsroom, and writers' workshop, for example. Students could also develop their own activity center theme, which often proved to be very popular. One student developed a mini-series of lessons that used magic and then taught the scientific principles behind the "tricks"; another student devised a "chalk walk" community activity as a one-time event that involved all students in creating a chalk landscape during the morning community-building activity time. The number of days a center would be offered varied. Some activities lasted one day but others were offered all four weeks of At Home At School.

#### **Thirsty Thinkers Writers' Workshop**

Based on the writers' workshop (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983) and Ernst's (1993) artists' workshop, I (Michael) offered the Thirsty Thinkers writers' workshop for children to have the opportunity to learn a narrative story-writing strategy which incorporated using art in the pre-writing stage of creating their own story. Students (N=43) entered Thirsty Thinkers each morning of the four-week session and listened to one of the teachers or me read a published story book to the group and discussed the story elements (characters, events) and concept of story structure.

The Ask, Reflect, Text strategy was presented each day visually on the dry-erase board and with an oral example of how to work through the three steps: students were to ask the WWW, W=2, H=2 questions; students could then reflect on the questions by illustrating their responses and story ideas with art so as to evade the challenges of composing text in this pre-writing phase; with their visual outline, students could then generate their story text using notepaper or a laptop with word-processing (e.g., WORD, 2007) and word-prediction software (e.g., CoWriter:

SOLO). The children could then read another story book (or listen to a book on CD) or immediately begin creating their own story using the Ask, Reflect, Text strategy. Teachers were available to read the WWW, W=2, H=2 questions and conference text when needed.

In the context of this study's arts-based/integrated-curriculum summer literacy program, "Thirsty Thinkers," had three main objectives: (1) to help children from low-income families improve their writing skills, (2) to offer an opportunity for pre-service teachers to apply strategy instruction to school-age children, and (3) to replicate a Thirsty Thinkers writing skills strategy (Dunn & Finley, 2008) which included the use of art to illustrate initial story ideas in the pre-writing phase and the option of writing-assistance software on laptops to compose text.

In the previous Thirsty Thinkers study (Dunn & Finley, 2008), participants used arts-based approaches although many preferred to use their own self-made narrative story writing strategies (e.g., a recursive cycle of writing, rereading, and then writing more text; Pokémon cards). In continuing our research we wanted the focus with a second group of children to be how or whether they would choose to use art in the pre-writing phase, and how they would incorporate the use of art with technology (writing assistance software) in planning and composing their own narrative texts.

#### **Data Analysis**

This study incorporated an action research approach that involved planning a strategy for improving narrative story writing skills, observing and participating in the process of teaching as well as analyzing the results of the change, reviewing the processes and results, and then reinitiating the planning, acting, and reflection cycle (Erickson, 1986; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). How students used the Ask, Reflect, Text strategy prompted the action of the research. Following the initial reading of a published story, explanation of the strategy, and the option of reviewing other story examples, students demonstrated their own interpretation of Ask, Reflect, Text, which provided for a daily cycle of planning, acting, and reflecting. The constructivist format (Dewey, 1938) of Thirsty Thinkers offered students the opportunity to explore and illustrate their own understanding and use of a strategy such as Ask, Reflect, Text.

The teachers and I (Michael) dia-

logue on a daily basis with students about the stories students created. The aim was to encourage as much elaborate story content as possible through using Ask, Reflect, Text. Teachers offered students as much assistance as they were willing to accept. Given the constructivist format of At Home At School, teachers did not demand that children create or revise a story against their wishes.

Children who participated in Thirsty Thinkers chose to be there, and within the construct of the class, they chose which centers they would utilize—for instance, would they read stories, draw story ideas, shape stories from clay, write on the computers using writing assistance software, or even dictate their stories for a teacher to record. How or whether a student adopted the Ask, Reflect, Text strategy was itself a matter of choice (see also Kim & White, 2008). The objective of this activity center was to see how students would interpret the Ask, Reflect, Text strategy; we could also later evaluate the structure and content of their written texts.

The curriculum-based measurement format for analyzing stories made the analysis authentic to the students' task and content in their final product (Hosp, Hosp, & Howell, 2007). An "elaborate" story was defined as a text which included content addressing all of the WWW, W=2, H=2 questions and good use of grammar and conventions. The teachers and I organized students' texts in a cumulative file and on a master thumb drive for students' stories saved on laptops. The teachers and I also tracked students' attendance and chosen activities (e.g., listen to a book on CD, initiated a new story, continued a story from the previous day, etc.) on Thirsty Thinkers' student information sheets.

#### **Representative Student-Participant Cases Discussed in This Study**

Of the students who participated in the Thirsty Thinkers writers workshop (N=43), I chose Brenda, Liam, and Kyle as representative cases for this analysis because each student had completed: sufficient interview data, a story plan (i.e., WWW, W=2, H=2 answers), an art product, and a story text. Brenda is a female student who was about to enter second grade in the fall of 2007. She attended Thirsty Thinkers for three 75-minute sessions. Liam is male and was about to enter third grade in the fall of 2007. This was his second summer at At Home At School. He attended Thirsty Thinkers during ten 75-minute sessions. Liam did not self-report



nor demonstrate any apparent difficulties with academics but his parents indicated that he was a struggling reader. Kyle was male and about to enter fourth grade in the fall of 2007. Kyle's parents reported and he confirmed his having characteristics of a struggling reader and writer as well as receiving special education services for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. It was reported that his previous school year had been difficult as his teacher often felt frustrated with his inattention, which was no doubt compounded by his difficulties with reading and writing. Each of the three students demonstrated use of the Ask, Reflect, Text strategy.

**Students' Interpretation of the Ask, Reflect, Text Strategy**

The intent of Thirsty Thinkers was to offer students an initial model of what an elaborate story looks and sounds like through oral reading of stories by teachers, to discuss the features of the story as a group, and to encourage students to develop their own individual text as a reflection of the initial story using the strategy. Alternatively, they could use other story books/books on CD to generate a different story topic or they could introduce their own story topic, unrelated to a storied prompt.

Students who attended Thirsty Thinkers over the 20-day program demonstrated an interest in the initial story time activity and discussion about the text's components. It was observed that

students readily engaged in discussion and by their questions, interpretations and inferences demonstrated interest in the particular story and its structure and meaning, although they frequently chose not to use the subject of the story as a prompt for their own writing. Following the description of the Thirsty Thinkers activity center components (e.g., books on CD, laptops, writing-assistance software [e.g., CoWriter:SOLO]) and the Ask, Reflect, Text strategy, the three students in this report demonstrated varied interpretations of how to go about writing a story or even what comprised an elaborate story.

**Brenda**

Brenda visited Thirsty Thinkers for three sessions. After the initial group activity of reading a story book about food and healthy eating, she demonstrated the format of the Ask, Reflect, Text strategy with a story about a pickle person (see Table 1). As she reviewed the WWW, W=2, H=2 questions with a teacher, she created a pickle person character out of play dough. She stated responses to all of the WWW, W=2, H=2 questions and created a visual representation that related to her chosen story topic. Brenda did not feel proficient at keyboarding to generate her text, but she indicated an interest in oral storytelling. As she dictated her story, I (Michael) taped it on a digital voice recorder for later transcription. In Brenda's story narrative, she identified the main event and how the story

concluded. If she had done a follow-up draft, she could have described the characters and scene to make her story more elaborate.

When asked to specify the steps to create an elaborate story, Brenda indicated an understanding of a strategy such as Ask, Reflect, Text:

*Michael:* What steps do you follow in creating a story?

*Brenda:* You start by thinking of the main character, what happens in a story, where the story takes place, and when does the story take place? You think what you want your story to be about? You make the main character. You write or type the words of the story. You draw illustrations. That is it.

In reflecting on Brenda's story and her use of writing strategies, Thirsty Thinkers teachers observed that both the arts-based pre-writing activity and the Ask, Reflect, Text strategies found practical applications in Brenda's writing efforts. In the pre-writing phase, "the use of art helped students create more ideas" said Francesca, a Thirsty Thinkers teacher. And Nancy, another teacher observed: "The WWW, W=2, H=2 outline was really useful because it helped students to get them thinking about their story." In contrast to Brenda, other students were open to keyboarding and use of writing-assistance software as demonstrated by both Liam and Kyle in the case reports that follow.

**Table 1**  
**Ask, Reflect, Text (ART) Strategy Example**

*"Pickle Person" by Brenda*



**Ask**

*Students ponder their answers to WWW questions:*

- (1) Pickle person, a hand that grabs the person.
- (2) moving into the afternoon.
- (3) a jar of pickles all by itself.
- (4) hand that wanted the pickle ran away.
- (5) Pickle goes to the side and dives to avoid the hand. The man reaches in to get the pickle. The pickle sucks up the juice and then releases the juice on the man.
- (6) The man then puts the jar back into the fridge and gives up. He then tells his wife to not go into the fridge.
- (7) Happy and cold. Happy he is not eaten. The man is just waiting for his wife to get a non-pickle jar.

**Reflect**

*Student sketches/paints the answers to the WWW questions so as to plan the story's content.*

**Text**

*Amber chose to dictate the story, which was recorded on digital-voice software:*

Once upon a time, there was a pickle person sitting in a jar. Then the hand tried to grab the pickle person. He went to the side of the jar and dived under all of the pickle juice. He laid at the bottom. The hand got pretty tired looking for the pickle person. He sat on a couch and was depressed for a long time. He waited for his wife to get a new pickle jar from the store. The end.

**Liam**

In each of the ten days Liam came to Thirsty Thinkers, he preferred to keyboard an expository-type text about trains, UFOs, or Lewis and Clark, all topics of his own choosing. He began his writing process at the keyboard without engaging in pre-writing arts-based activities. Nancy (a teacher) observed that this was true of other students as well:

Many students wanted to first type their text before illustrating their story ideas. When they are excited to write, it could be best to just let them write. The computers were a real draw for the students.

To assist Liam it was determined through the research review that providing individual modeling and practice could help Liam see the potential benefit of following the Ask, Reflect Text sequence by using art in a follow-up draft as a means to consider ideas in developing a more elaborate text. Thus, the first draft would be a pre-writing exercise, the art-making would be a second pre-writing experience, and in writing the follow-up draft Liam's would further develop his skills with the processes of describing story characters, setting, the main event, and drawing a cohesive conclusion.

At the end of the third week, I asked Liam if he would be willing to choose a story

book that that we could read together and then write a narrative follow-up story using the Ask, Reflect, Text strategy. He agreed and chose the book entitled *Very Unusual Pets* (Gutner, 2001). Liam was cooperative in following the Ask, Reflect, Text strategy steps, but he demonstrated uncertainty in doing it—as though he was unsure about its purpose. As we reviewed the WWW, W=2, H=2 questions, I noted his responses while he created his art illustration. Afterward, Liam converted his story-content ideas into text with the use of writing-assistance software (see Table 2).

Like Brenda, Liam did not provide a description of the setting (a city) or the characters. His story began with the main event and concluded with an ending and attention to how the characters felt. Liam varied his types of sentences (e.g., simple, compound). He demonstrated knowledge of paragraphing. Various types of punctuation also helped make the text more elaborate. Liam's use of exclamation marks was unconventional but could be interpreted as enthusiastic or as a demonstration of his personal style (e.g., "He said yes!!!"). He used spelling-assistance software (CoWriter:SOLO), when needed, to verify the spelling of unknown words.

In a follow-up draft, Liam could have employed more of the strategies he had been given to be more descriptive about himself

and other characters actually mentioned later in the passage (e.g., Ted was noted in the Ask pre-writing plan but never mentioned in the Text of the story) as well as the setting: What was the city like? From where was the train leaving—Coos Bay Lumber Company? When Curious George and the Man with the Yellow Hat arrived at Liam's house, was his dad not aware that they had come into the house? Did his dad arrive at the house after Liam and his friends? The text offers a timeline and details but lacks some cohesion between story elements.

Over the ten days that Liam visited Thirsty Thinkers, he wrote 11 stories. All were one page in length and focused on either the main event of a story with little introduction and conclusion or were expository in nature describing a specific train. An example:

**The History of the Union Pacific Big Boy!**

There once was a giant who roamed the rails of the American west in the 1940s and 1950s. It was the Union Pacific Big Boy with four Pilot wheels, two sets of eight driving wheels and four trailing wheels (4-8-8-4)! The Big Boy is really two engines under one boiler!

The Big Boy is The LARGEST Steam Locomotive in the world!!!!!!!!!!!!!! A Big Boy could pull a five mile freight train on flat terrain! A Big Boy could attach anyone, especially a train engineer on his

**Table 2**  
**Ask, Reflect, Text (ART) Strategy Example**

**"The Best Birthday" by Liam**



**Ask**

Students ponder their answers to WWW questions:

- (1) Curious George, Ted, Tom and Jerry, Pink Panther.
- (2) Josie, a man with a yellow hat.
- (3) October 13, 2002.
- (4) a city.
- (5) Ted and Curious George come to Liam's house for a birthday party and play games. Curious George, Liam and Jerry win. They are happy that they won and do the splits.
- (6) They leave in Curious George's car.
- (7) Happy that they had a sleepover and a party.

**Reflect**

Student sketches/paints the answers to the WWW questions so as to plan the story's content.

**Text**

Student types the text with word-processing software:

It is October 13th, 2002. I, Liam, am riding the Coos Bay Lumber Company # 105 a 2-8-2 mikado. When the train was starting to depart, Curious George rode with the Man with the Yellow Hat to my house. They Knocked on my door. They opened it. It was empty, of course, because I was not there. They walked in. Josie was so happy that she did the splits!!! Curious George and the Man with the Yellow hat looked for me. They didn't find me.

Soon someone knocked at the door. It was Tom and Jerry! Soon someone else knocked at the door. It was the Pink Panther! They got bored. So they played a game. At 6:00 I came home through downstairs. I heard some sounds up stairs. They were playing with my train set. Soon Tom, Jerry, Pink Panther, Curious George & I were bored playing with my train and waiting for dinner so we played a game.

Soon it was dinner time!!! We had Spaghetti & Meatballs and costly!!!. Then I asked my Dad if they could stay for a sleep over. He said yes!!! They were so happy that they did the splits!!! We had a sleep over. It was fun!!!. Soon it was the next day. They had to leave at 11:00 a.m. They left. It was the best Birthday in my whole, whole, whole, whole life!!!

first Railroad job! When Big Boys came they had to straighten out sharp curves. First Big Boy I saw. The first Big Boy I Saw was at the Museum of Transportation on W Barot Station Road in St. Louis, Missouri. You can go in the cab of the Union Pacific 4-8-8-4 Big Boy #4006!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Liam demonstrated proficiency with sentence structure and syntax. His apparent confusion or lack of confidence while working with me (Michael) through the Ask, Reflect, Text strategy steps indicated to me that Liam's understanding of elaborate stories was still developing. With more focused practice using the steps of the strategy, Liam could improve with creating elaborate story content. Liam's Thirsty Thinkers seatmate, Kyle, would also benefit from Ask, Reflect, Text (see Table 3).

**Kyle**

Kyle was Liam's best friend in the At Home At School summer program. Whatever Liam did, Kyle wanted to do too. Where Liam had participated in the

program during two summers and had attended monthly Art Saturday and Outdoors! Environmental Education events during the school year, Kyle was new to the At Home At School environment. For Kyle, the deschooling process and empowerment of choice was a new experience. Students choose classes for a variety of reasons and his choice of Thirsty Thinkers may have been based in friendship.

Kyle did not demonstrate proficiency with writing and was identified as a "struggling writer." As mentioned previously, Kyle and his parents had self-reported attention deficit and hyperactivity and a learning disability in reading and writing. Composing his own text would be difficult given that students who do not practice reading regularly stem their development as readers and writers (Shaywitz, 2003). For this type of student, the Ask, Reflect, Text strategy is thought to be particularly helpful as it provides a step-by-step process to accomplish the narrative story-writing task.

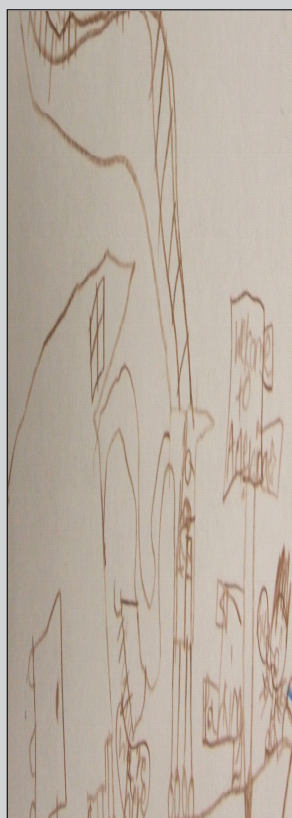
On Kyle's first day at Thirsty Think-

ers, he did not want to start with art but rather text with the laptop—as Liam did. Kyle stated that he had a story topic in mind based on previous research he had done at school. He wanted to write about ancient Roman warriors coming to America. Kyle initially commented that the WWW, W=2, H=2 questions were similar in format to what he did at school and he told his teachers he didn't need to spend much time thinking about the strategic questions for that reason. Even with prior instruction with what represents elaborate story content, it was observed that Kyle could benefit from additional examples and ongoing practice. When asked if he would work one-on-one with a Thirsty Thinkers teacher in using the Ask, Reflect, Text strategy, Kyle agreed and participated enthusiastically, while showing open appreciation for the opportunity to have feedback about his writing.

Kyle was able to identify ideas for each of the WWW, W=2, H=2 questions at a later session. His art illustration included a sign, "Welcome to America," and a railroad track

**Table 3**  
**Ask, Reflect, Text (ART) Strategy Example**

**"The Biggest War" by Kyle**



**Ask**

- Students ponder their answers to WWW questions:*
- (1) The commander emperor of the Romans.
  - (2) 39 AD.
  - (3) America, Africa, Germany, Rome, Italy.
  - (4) The emperor wants to team up with American Indians and cowboys.
  - (5) The Roman and American Emperors join their troops and go to China.
  - (6) The good Samurais went to America. The bad Samurais went to Germany and Africa.
  - (7) The Emperors were happy and wanted to celebrate.

**Reflect**

*Student sketches/paints the answers to the WWW questions so as to plan the story's content.*

**Text**

*Student types the text with word-processing software:*

The Biggest War

Once there was a war in 39ad. The U.S.A's partners were the French and the Romans. The Romans sent night armies to the U.S.A. and The Germans went to America with the Roman's biggest enemy the Africans. So the commander and Emperor of the Romans went to America and asked if they can team up with the USA. The Roman and American Emperor joined their troops and went to China. They got the Samurais to join them and the Romans shipped them to Germany. On the ship two Romans were guarding the boxes, two guarding the door, and two watching sides for sharks. The Germans are happy that Samurais came, so they gave them 2 million dollars and a note that says "Thank you for bringing the Samurais!" The Cowboys from America and the Samurais from China battle the evil Samurais and Germans in Germany.

The American Indians and the African Indians battled each other in America. The African Indians lost and joined the good side with the cowboys and the American Indians. Then the Japanese soldiers joined the evil knights in England, who were battling the good knights. The American Cowboys, Indians and African Indians went to England to help the Good knights in the battle against the Japanese soldiers and the evil knights.

The Australians began to wonder what is going on because the Japanese and the Germans kept asking for more armor. They were getting their armor from China, but it had been eight months. They usually got their armor in two months! So then the Japanese and Germans went to China, and the Chinese said, "Get out of our country, we'll give you your armor in two days. Leave or we will kill you!" The Japanese and Germans say, "okaaaayy...."

The Chinese gave their armor to the evil nights. The Antarciticans gave their armor to the evil and good nights. The Australians were giving armor to the Romans.

The Romans said that they would pay 1 million dollars to the Australians for all that armor. And they did. Then the Australians paid them \$3,000. The good Samurais went to America and the bad Samurais went to Germany.

The End



implied the travel of the Romans, French, American, and German soldiers—it is an active story. In Kyle's text, the concept of describing the scene and characters was provided by including the time period (39 A.D.) and who the characters were. He noted Italians in the story plan but did not include them in the actual text.

Following this initial section of the text, Kyle then described what a reader could interpret as a repetitive list of travel locations by the soldiers; there was no traditional or linear underlying plot but a sense of movement and action was conveyed. The theme of nations engaged in perpetual fighting was coherent. It was impressive in Kyle's writing that he was able to list dates and locations, while striking a tone consistent with reporting history, even while rewriting the facts of history with regard to alliances and historical time frame.

If Kyle had described the characters' perspectives or feelings, this would have provided his readers with some further insight as to the meaning of the action. Use of descriptive words would have helped illustrate the scene. At no point in the story was the purpose of the battles stated. The action may have been appealing to the author, but a reader needs to be provided with a clearly stated purpose for the text.

Kyle's text indicated that he would benefit from hearing and reading more examples of published stories and discussing the concepts of story structure, use of descriptive words, and strategies to encourage readers' interest throughout the story. The writing software could also have been used by Kyle so that he would need to pay less attention to the mechanics and focus on story-writing; however, when asked if he would be interested in trying the word-prediction software (CoWriter: SOLO) to help him with his spelling, Kyle said that he, "would use it only for words he did not know how to spell."

In working with Kyle during the 10 days he visited Thirsty Thinkers, it was apparent how sporadic his thought processes were as teachers tried to help him with his writing. He would constantly state names or places and then change his mind; helping him to focus on a storyline was a challenge. His characteristics of having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder were evident in teacher reports. The writing strategies he was given were particularly helpful to Kyle and provided a step-by-step process to accomplish the narrative story-writing task.

### **Reflections about the Students and their Stories**

Brenda, Liam, and Kyle each had a unique interpretation of the Ask, Reflect, Text strategy. All three enjoyed the initial group-reading activity. Brenda liked oral story telling while Liam and Kyle preferred keyboarding. Personal characteristics, practice with the skill of writing, and the nature of the learning environment could have all played a role in how students generally demonstrated their writing skills and how they could have improved. All three returned more than once. With engaging activities and materials, they demonstrated their interest in writing and a desire to improve their skills.

### **The Ask, Reflect, Text Strategy and Teacher Practice**

#### **Potential Benefits of This Study**

There were four potential benefits from this study for teachers of writing to consider. First, the Thirsty Thinkers writers' workshop offered students the opportunity to learn a story-writing strategy to produce more elaborate text. Within the constructivist format of the At Home At School Program, 43 students chose to attend the Thirsty Thinkers writers' workshop activity center; many students came away with a positive perspective about writing.

Second, the activity center provided a variety of materials for students to review published stories as well as create their own with art and writing-assistance software. Teachers could use this model for their own classrooms.

Third, students' use of the Ask, Reflect, Text sequence provided representative case examples for teachers to analyze in preparing to use the strategy with their own students.

Fourth, reviewing strategies discussed in this article (e.g., Ask, Reflect, Text; WWW, W=2, H=2, Plan, Organize, Write) may prompt teachers to reflect on their own writing-skills pedagogy and how they could help promote students' improvement with the often challenging task of becoming better writers.

#### **Reflecting on Students' Use of the Ask, Reflect, Text Strategy**

Reviewing students' use of a strategy such as Ask, Reflect, Text offers the opportunity to ponder how teachers could promote students' writing skills. In this study, Brenda, Liam, and Kyle were willing to try the Ask, Reflect, Text strategy.

They were each able to articulate ideas for the WWW, W=2, H=2 questions as they illustrated their ideas with pencil crayons, markers, or play dough.

In contrast to our first Thirsty Thinkers study (Dunn & Finley, 2008) in which participants created a variety of self-made strategies, students in this study were generally inclined to follow the Ask, Reflect, Text strategy but not necessarily in sequence. Considering Brenda, Liam, and Kyle's uses of Ask, Reflect, Text, only Brenda followed the strategy as intended.

Another issue was that "some students found it difficult to put their ideas into narrative form" (Francesca, August 1, 2007). There are two possible reasons for this. First, the student-choice nature of a summer literacy project made it impractical to demand that students follow the Ask, Reflect, Text sequence as presented; students had the option to do their own interpretation. In many traditional classrooms students would also have the freedom to choose their own interpretation of a proffered strategy, so it can be expected that many children will not prefer to use the intended sequence.

Second, students need to have extended practice as to what good elaborate stories should contain beyond what Thirsty Thinkers provided at the beginning of each daily session. Individual learning approaches and development play into this as well, but we believe our writing instruction was benefited by enthusiastic participation by students in the daily discussions of the structure of stories that were read to them. Learning to write is not an innate task; initiative, practice, and pre-requisite literacy skills need to be present together for children to create elaborate text (Santangelo, Harris, & Graham, 2008).

To promote students' initiative to write elaborate stories in the context of a summer literacy program, the Thirsty Thinkers writers' workshop offered children a number of incentives to help improve their writing. Participants listened to books, participated in group discussions about story content and what comprised a good narrative story; Harvey and Goudvis (2000) encourage this practice of explaining and modeling strategies to children so as to help facilitate their independence in a skill such as writing.

So as to evade spelling words in the pre-writing phase which is often a challenge for struggling writers, children were provided the Ask, Reflect, Text strategy which encouraged the use of art to note

initial story ideas. Students could also later use writing-assistance software to help generate their text. Although At Home At School participants had a number of inviting activity center choices to attend, Thirsty Thinkers attracted a large number (N=43) of students who were interested in learning how to write elaborate stories. laptops, art, and books on CD may be inviting ideas that engage students and promote interest but sustained practice is needed as well for students to attain elaborate story content.

**Translating Thirsty Thinkers' Findings into the Writing Classroom**

Students who struggle with writing usually do not need anything different from other typically-achieving children; they just need more examples and practice (Foorman, 2007). In the case of Thirsty Thinkers, a classroom format which offers small groups or individual students with structured practice with writing skills could provide a means for struggling writers to learn the Ask, Reflect, Text strategy in a more systematic fashion (Tomlinson, 2001). Santangelo, Harris, and Graham's (2008) self-regulated strategy development model would be one example. Students were presented with a strategy and had to demonstrate commitment to learning and using it; there was no real component of student freedom to go do another activity once committed. Students were provided with about fifty minutes of daily instruction and practice with the strategy and were encouraged to generalize the strategy to other applicable writing tasks.

Saddler et al. (2004) found this process to be effective. Ask, Reflect, Text could prove more beneficial for Brenda, Liam, and Kyle in this type of learning format which included multiple examples of how to use the strategy, prolonged student practice and feedback from the teacher, and progression to independent use of the strategy. Or, they could have benefitted from the choice and freedom, instead of shutting down and giving up because there was only one sustained option. Brenda, Liam, and Kyle all demonstrated sustained interest in and commitment to a writer's workshop. We can ask: Would that interest have sustained if they had not experienced flexibility in their use of writing strategies?

Teachers of writing also need to address pre-requisite literacy skills if their students' background experiences in writing are limited. For example, students in

families experiencing poverty or homelessness may also experience difficulties with reading and writing due to little or no literate practices at home. Children may not be read to by their parents or guardians either due to their long work hours, lack of financial resources to purchase story books, or lack of knowledge and experience in visiting the local public library, or because the parents have not been educated on the benefits, no one read to them, or they have no frame of reference for this practice. In any case, all children benefit from multiple examples of a strategy, extended practice, and ongoing feedback (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997).

Thirsty Thinkers offered students a model of how to help those who struggle with writing narrative stories by: providing multiple examples of what good writing looks like, working through multiple examples of a strategy with children so that they can see how a proficient writer completes the task, providing students with a strategy that can help them should they commit to learning and using it, fading adult involvement over time so as to help the student develop self-sufficiency in the skill, and asking students to consider how they can generalize a strategy to other writing tasks (Deschler, Warner, Schumaker, & Alley, 1984).

A strategy such as Ask, Reflect, Text can augment a teacher's writing program but cannot replace it. A general education classroom's writing program includes a variety of writing-skills practices which provide a foundation for strategy instruction: handwriting, spelling, capitalization, punctuation, sentence construction, usage, development of a rich vocabulary, a familiarity with the functions of writing, an appreciation for their audience, and acquisition of a writing voice (Santangelo, Harris, & Graham, 2008).

Thirsty Thinkers teachers read a published story each day and discussed why it represented a good narrative story (e.g., answered the WWW, W=2, H=2 questions, illustrations to provide visual representations). Classroom teachers can blend this into the shared reading time they would already do with their students (Tomlinson, 2001); emphasizing the WWW, W=2, H=2 questions would help make instruction more explicit for students who lack knowledge of this aspect of writing. Offering multiple examples over time promotes this goal. The length of a strategy-instruction timeline for a child who struggles with writing can vary depending on the sever-

ity of need; best practice is not to devote one long instructional session but rather offer ongoing practice and feedback to the student such as 20 to 30minute sessions over 10 to 20 weeks, for example (Vaughn & Roberts, 2007).

In offering students a strategy such as Ask, Reflect, Text, working through the process with children helps them develop a thinking process to master the task themselves. Struggling readers and writers often do not know how to do something simply because they have never done that task before, or they feel incapable because they have not had success with the task in the past (Pajares & Gio Valiante, 2006). After initial cooperative practice and then fading teacher involvement, students will begin to see that they can manage the steps of a strategy like Ask, Reflect, Text, and improve their writing skills. A change in skill level from below grade level to benchmark would typically be too much of an increase to expect for many struggling writers given the multifaceted nature of skills that promote good writing (Berninger & Winn, 2006). The short-term goal is to see some degree of improvement over time.

The ultimate goal of any strategy is that students would independently use a given strategy for any applicable task. In this study, the intent of Ask, Reflect, Text was to offer students a means to note pre-writing ideas without having to spell and write words—the most prevalent challenge for struggling writers. Illustrating initial ideas was encouraged so that students could focus on what they wanted to include in their text and leave the text-creation phase for later. At that point, they could refer back to their visual ideas to reinvigorate their minds as to what they intended to include in their text.

This process could be easily adapted to tasks other than just narrative stories by replacing the WWW, W=2, H=2 questions with questions representing the desired content. Using science as an example, the questions could relate to what should be included in a science experiment (What is the hypothesis? What materials were used? What were the procedures? What were the conclusions? Etc.). For social studies, questions relating to the history of a battle could represent the Ask component (Where did the battle take place? Which groups/countries represented the opposing forces? Who won? What was the resulting agreement?) Ask, Reflect, Text has potential for a variety of writing purposes for many struggling writers.



### Final Thought

In reflecting on the 20-day 2007 program, Nancy, a writers' workshop teacher, commented that, "Thirsty Thinkers participants were really excited to write. Even first graders made a real effort to apply the strategy" (August 1, 2007). Students of all ages can use illustrations. Applying them to writing may or may not be a new practice to them. For struggling writers, the use of art can help make their story products more elaborate.

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