

Marilyn Keller Nicol

Sharing the Pen: An Exploration of Interactive Writing in Early Childhood Classrooms

Marilyn Keller Nicol is a doctoral student and SAGES fellow at Texas A&M University Corpus Christi. Her research interests include literacy education and culturally responsive pedagogy.

Each morning, a class of three, four, and five-year-old students scamper to the large carpet and eagerly await their teacher to introduce the sentence of the day. The teacher joins the students and excitedly whispers, "1, 2, 3, all eyes on me. Today's sentence is from our book titled 'Pat's Cats' by Liza Charlesworth." As the teacher sits by the large easel, she models writing the beginning of this sentence based on a book enjoyed by her students:

"Pat's cat likes..."

The teacher prompts the class by saying, "Can you think of any words from our book that would finish this sentence? Remember, this week we are working on the -at word family."

One-by-one, the students take turns generating ideas for words to complete the sentence.

One student raises her hand and says, "Hats!"

Another student shouts, "Bats!"

The teacher writes an "m" on the easel and asks, "What word would we make if we put an 'm' at the beginning of the -at word family? Let's sound it out together."

The lesson moves along quickly as the students come up to the easel and write words to complete the sentence using colored markers. After an extensive list of -at words has been generated, the lesson moves onto punctuation and proper spacing between words. Using props such as magnets and pointers, students come up, one at a time to identify letters, punctuation marks, words, and the spaces separating them. For brief moments in this exercise, there is an exchange of roles as the lesson becomes student-directed. The teacher is there to guide the

process. At the completion of the lesson, a student demonstrates reading left to right with a pointer as the class repeats the sentence chorally.

Once again, the interactive sentence for the day reinforces the concept of the connection between reading and writing and allows time for students to scaffold one another.

This vignette describes what my Pre-K classroom looked like every morning when I conducted an interactive writing lesson with my students. While these lessons were wildly fun and popular with my students, the benefits of interactive writing were exponential. I first recognized the need to teach writing to my early childhood students when they wrote and drew in their journals. They weren't quite sure what to do, and they had difficulty responding to a prompt with an illustration or words. Pelatti and colleagues (2014) stated that, although preschoolers arrive in class ready to write, they are rarely engaged in meaningful writing activities in school. The type of writing activities in which preschoolers typically engage are focused on letter formation, tracing letters, copying words, and writing their name (Pelatti et al., 2014). For my early childhood students, I realized these type of writing activities would not scaffold their ability to express their ideas on paper.

When preschoolers begin to write independently, teachers should be mindful of the developmental stages of writing that young students undergo. These stages are developmentally appropriate, and teachers should

Sharing the Pen

look for ways to inspire early emergent writers. Teachers ought to expect preschoolers and early emergent writers to scribble. It is important that teachers encourage such scribbling. By asking students what their scribbling means, teachers can seek the deeper meaning of students' scribbling and validate their responses. Emerson and Hall (2018) discussed the ways in which intentional writing interactions support early emergent writing development for preschoolers in the scribbling phase of development. Intentional writing interactions with young students helps them see the value in writing, especially when adults model writing. Interactive writing lessons provide opportunities for teachers to model the writing process, and plan intentional writing experiences for young students.

Therefore, I researched, developed, and implemented daily interactive writing. These lessons provided a way to scaffold my students' foundational skills in letter formation and phonological and phonemic awareness to the generative process of self-expression on paper. Through my research, I discovered interactive writing is a strategy for teaching composition to young students. Implementing interactive writing allowed my students to become writer apprentices at my side (McCarrier et al., 2000). McCarrier and colleagues (2000) pointed to interactive writing lessons as a way to afford all students, regardless of their writing experience, opportunities to participate and feel like readers and writers. Within the interactive writing lesson, students are able to reach beyond their current independent writing skills to practice constructing a text and make meaning with words and conventions (McCarrier et al., 2000).

Benefits of Interactive Writing

According to Hall (2014), interactive writing can provide a developmentally appropriate context for conducting ongoing assessment of students of varying ages and abilities in one lesson. In the same lesson, the teacher can focus on

foundational literacy skills such as letter recognition, phonemic awareness, and basic print concepts, while also moving onto more advanced skills such as grammar, punctuation, style, and mechanics. The flexibility of the lesson allows the teacher to engage each student at their unique level of understanding. In addition, the students scaffold one another's understanding of the content. Interactive writing enables the teacher to witness the individual strengths of their students. Some students may be more adept at correcting errors or editing for spelling, while some students may be displaying strengths in word solving or letter formation.

Furthermore, Zhang and Quinn (2017) suggested integrating interactive writing into routines for Morning Message Time (MMT). MMT usually involves whole group instruction that engages students with the class calendar, weather, attendance, discussion of themes under study, and other daily routines for preparing for the day. Integrating interactive writing at this time of day allows the teacher to help students make engaging connections to other classroom content, such as books, holidays, and thematic units. MMT also capitalizes on existing routines for classroom management, enabling instruction to be more effective and run smoothly. Interestingly, although this is a whole group activity, Zhang and Quinn (2017) recommended having some writing materials available during MMT that students can use individually, such as dry erase boards, clip boards, or tablets. They argued that these tools help elicit high-yield written responses from all students because they do not have to take turns sharing the pen.

One of the greatest potential benefits of integrating interactive writing lessons into class curriculum is the exponential gain students might make in regard to their independent writing skills. I recommend that teachers follow up interactive writing lessons with opportunities for students to write independently. One way for teachers to provide this opportunity for generalization of writing skills is through journaling activities.

Sharing the Pen

Rubadue (2002) shared her experience with hesitant writers in her classroom. When Rubadue noticed some students did not know how to engage in journal writing, she transitioned from transcribing students' writing to sharing the pen. She noticed how students paid more attention to the craft and conventions of writing in her lessons. She helped establish a classroom full of students who enjoyed journal writing. She described how her students were inventive and creative, constantly experimenting with new elements of craft and conventions of writing.

Tips for Implementation of Interactive Writing

Williams (2017) revealed six major tips for enhancing interactive writing lessons for the purpose of developing students' ability to write.

Interactive writing:

1. Allows the teacher to model using resources to generate ideas or topics to write about. In my lessons, we used books related to the weekly theme, rhyming words and word families. I prompted my students to recall things that we read or look through a book to jog their memory about a word or sentence. I also taught my students to use their peers as a resource to help them generate ideas. If my students were having a difficult time generating a word or reading a sentence, we would stop the lesson briefly, and they would take a minute to discuss with a partner and come up with solutions.
2. Supports students in learning about genre. In early childhood classrooms, I recommend focusing on fiction and non-fiction as genres. Within the fiction genre, students can learn about make-believe, narrative story writing. Non-fiction exercises can focus on reporting the weather, describing holidays, or comparing and contrasting two stories.

3. Provides opportunities for teachers to model monitoring meaning. Interactive writing focuses students on attending to sense-making in writing and supports the writer's ability to sustain the writing process through challenges in composition. An example of how I would embed this in my lesson is to intentionally suggest a word that does not make sense. My students then worked through the challenge of ensuring that our sentence made sense. This work built their problem-solving skills as writers.
4. Authentically reinforces orthographic concepts of print for young students. These concepts include reading left to right, capitalization, punctuation, and any general representations of written language which contribute to making meaning. In my lessons, I never allowed any orthographic elements to be taken for granted. As a class, we decided where the period belonged, which letters needed to be capitalized and why, where the spaces belonged between words, and any other print concepts that were relevant to that day's sentence. This also grants more occasions for students to interact with the day's sentence and experience ownership of it.
5. Promotes word solving strategies. When students are invited to come up to the board and write a word, often they may struggle with spelling. Other than just helping students sound out phonemes, teachers can model strategies for word solving. Some of these strategies that I used were Elkonin sound boxes (Horner and O'Connor, 2007), chunking words into syllables, and using a reference such as our word wall or a list of sight words.
6. Links the whole group activity to an independent writing assignment. For my students, the independent exercise was responding to a prompt in their journals every Friday. This time allowed for skills and

Sharing the Pen

concepts learned in whole group lessons to become part of students' independent writing practices. Some other ways teachers can implement independent practice is by placing composition materials in a center for students to use on their own or create a composition take home kit. Emerson and Hall (2018) recommended that teachers place writing materials in the dramatic play center, block center, and book center. These additional opportunities to write provide ways for students to engage independently in writing through play.

Conclusion

Writing is a required skill that students must develop in order to graduate high school. However, writing is more than just a skill that is needed to pass high school: writing is an important tool for personal expression and communication. One can see from the scenario described in the opening vignette that students get excited about writing and creating. Beginning to build students' writing skillset at a young age holds the same benefits as starting early reading activities. Interactive writing is a fun and dynamic way to approach writing instruction that meets the needs of a wide range of students.

References

Emerson & Hall. (2018). Supporting preschoolers' writing identities in the scribbling phase. *The Reading Teacher*, 72(2), 257-260. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1699>

Hall, A. (2016). Sustaining preschoolers' engagement during interactive writing lessons. *The Reading Teacher*, 70(3), 365-369. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1521>

Hall, A. (2014). Interactive writing: Developmentally appropriate practice in blended classrooms. *Young Children*, 69(3), 34-38.

Horner, S. and O'Connor, E. (2007). Helping beginning and struggling readers to develop self-regulated strategies: A reading recovery example. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 23(1), 97-109.

McCarrier, A., Pinnell, G. S., & Fountas, I. C. (2000). *Interactive writing: How language and literacy come together, K-2*. Heinemann.

Pelatti, Piasta, Justice, & O'Connell (2014). Language- and literacy-learning opportunities in early childhood classrooms: Children's typical experiences and within-classroom variability. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 29(4), 445-456. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2014.05.004>

Rubadue, M. (2002). Sharing the pen. *Teaching PK-8*, 32(6), 58-59.

Williams, C. (2017). Learning to write with interactive writing instruction. *The Reading Teacher*, 71 (5), 523-532. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1643>

Zhang, C. & Quinn, M. (2018). Promoting early writing skills through morning meeting routines: Guidelines for best practices. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 46, 547-556. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-017-0886-2>