

“Kid Mice Hunt for Their Selves”: First and Second Graders Writing Research

SYLVIA READ

Read presents four case studies to examine how her first and second graders worked together using source texts to write their own informational books.

The writing curriculum experienced by many American students as they go up through the grades is essentially: story, story, story, story, story, story, story, story, story, story, term paper.

—Daniels (1990, p. 107)

After reading and writing predominantly fictional and poetic texts in the primary grades (Pressley, Rankin, & Yokoi, 1995), third- and fourth-grade students suddenly are asked to write formal reports in an expository mode. They are expected to work with source materials (e.g., encyclopedia articles, magazine articles, information books, information videos) and write about what they have read in ways that demonstrate their understanding of the material. Daniels (1990) laments:

This collision with the dreaded term paper assignment is the most dramatic, most worried over and perhaps most emblematic demonstration of the “expository gap” in the curriculum. (p. 107)

Daniels argues further that because the curriculum is out of balance, the overemphasizing fictional and personal-experience writing genres, American schoolchildren are much less fluent and experienced with writing in genres that involve persuasion, information, explanation, description, and analysis. Furthermore, the tendency is for children to write fact-based, encyclopedia-like rehearsals of surface knowledge rather than writing reports that fully integrate several sources and their prior knowledge (Cazden, 1993). They often copy, word for word, from sources (Lewis, Wray & Rospigliosi, 1994) without displaying much understanding (Reutzel, Larson, & Sabey, 1994, p. 98).

Some argue that poor performance with reading and writing expository texts in the later grades might be due to a lack of experience with nonnarrative texts in the early grades (Donovan, 1997). If this is the case, children should become familiar with and have experience with many genres from an early age. Furthermore, for some children, the benefit of reading and writing nonnarrative texts goes beyond simply preparing them for future encounters with nonnarrative texts. Interacting with nonnarrative texts may be the best path to overall literacy for some students, particularly boys and struggling readers/writers (Caswell & Duke, 1998).

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As Moss, Leone, and Dipillo (1997) suggest, "If today's students are to survive in the 'Information Age,' it is imperative that they develop greater familiarity with and understanding of expository text" (p. 418). By providing opportunities to read and write using information texts, educators can strengthen students' understanding of the content they are researching *and* make the language arts an integral part of the learning process.

HOW DO YOUNG CHILDREN READ AND WRITE INFORMATION?

I was curious to find out what my students could do in terms of writing informational texts, using as sources some information tradebooks from the school library and their own classroom experiences. In the fall, because our school's garden was overrun with praying mantises, we studied praying mantises by observing them and by reading books about them. I read aloud and the students would tell me what they had learned or what was important about what I had read. I served as a scribe, taking notes as they dictated. This process of reading and writing took place over a week's time. We reread our notes every day before adding more. Later, with the notes set aside, they dictated to me their own class book about the praying mantis. This text was our shared reading for the following week and it was later published for the classroom library.

Because this was so successful, I wanted to see what the children could do on their own. I let the students work in small groups of two or three on a topic of their own choosing. They chose a variety of topics, from polar bears to jets. I provided texts for them to read that I checked out from the school library and the local public library. I audiotaped the children as they read and wrote together in order to try to capture the processes they were using.

My class consisted of first and second graders in a multi-age classroom at Edith Bowen Lab School on the campus of Utah State University. The students came from a wide variety of economic backgrounds, but were primarily white and middle class.

In this article, I follow four case studies involving pairs of first- and second-grade students who worked together using source texts to write their own information books. I examine how they used the source texts, how they interacted, the content of their interactions, and the writing they produced as a result of their work together.

JOHN AND CAMERON

Cameron and John chose to write about ancient Egypt. They were both excellent readers and writers. They were friends and had written fiction together on other occasions. When they began working together the first day, they chose a section of a book called "Military Adventures." They tried to read and write about that particular section, reading each sentence and paraphrasing it. They argued about the meaning of the

sentence they were trying to paraphrase: "The Egyptians were not a military people by nature." The phrase "by nature" was misunderstood by John to mean that they didn't use nature "to do stuff." They thought of military as a noun rather than as an adjective and so they associated the word military with things and places rather than ways of behaving. Ultimately, John paraphrased the sentence as "The Egyptians were not really a very good military." They paraphrased three more sentences but then abandoned this strategy. They then separated and began to work independently, reading silently and drawing and writing independently.

Much of their talk took the form of evaluative comments.

Though they weren't working together any more, they did talk about what they were doing, especially while drawing. They drew mummy cases, pyramids, and the sphinx. They were looking at the illustrations in their books while they drew, but they were also using their previous knowledge of ancient Egypt as a source. Cameron referred to information he had learned from reading a book on pyramids that he had checked out from the school library and had been reading at home. John referred to information that he had learned from a CD-ROM on ancient Egypt that he had checked out from the public library and used at home.

Much of their talk took the form of evaluative comments about their own and each other's drawings. John explained to Cameron how to draw the Sphinx, they discussed which things were hard to draw and which were easy, and they discussed how to show the inside of a pyramid. John criticized Cameron's drawings occasionally with comments like, "How could a pyramid float in thin air?"

They used their talk to clarify the meanings they were constructing from the illustrations and their own drawing. For example, they discussed what pyramids were built with, where their entrances were, how the inside of a pyramid was constructed, and how mummies were processed. One illustration in a book showed the size of the Great Pyramid of Khufu relative to other international landmarks such as the Statue of Liberty and the Eiffel Tower. They discussed each landmark and its relative size, thus clarifying their understanding of the size of the Great Pyramid.

They also speculated about their knowledge of the interior of the pyramid through a long discussion about mummy robbers, false passages and doorways, and hidden traps that would catch a potential mummy robber:

CAMERON: I need to read this again. I'm gonna just draw a pyramid like this. No other wall. There. Is that what a pyramid looks like? And don't they have other rooms in it? Or just a mummy room?

JOHN: They do have false stairways to trap people.

CAMERON: What do you mean?

JOHN: Um, trap king robbers.

CAMERON: Trying to steal the mummies?

JOHN: Yeah. And other things.

CAMERON: What are the traps?

JOHN: Well, for instance, there's a false stairway down that ends up, that's just like that, except it comes to an end, but when you get to the edge of the pyramid, there's a wall. They were king robbers.

CAMERON: And so then they'll just decide to go out? Like this? John, like that?

JOHN: No. No. It's like this.

CAMERON: Oh. On the other side. I wonder why they have little drops?

JOHN: It's not drops. It's really supposed to go this way. Kind of slanting down. And then. . . .

CAMERON: No, but how do they get in?

JOHN: In the mummy room.

CAMERON: Are they trying to steal mummies?

JOHN: Yeah, but then they take the wrong door. There'd be two doors. One's right here. The way they came in.

CAMERON: But they go into a mummy room and steal a mummy. And then they'll go down the other way?

JOHN: Well, it's built to fool them.

CAMERON: Then they'll go up, steal a mummy, then go down?

JOHN: Actually, they'll go up, steal a mummy, then go like, “Oh there it is. That's where it is. That's where I came out.” Then they walk down. “Oh no I'm trapped. Ah! Help!”

CAMERON: And is it hard to get up with the mummy?

JOHN: Yeah. It's easy to go down—you just slide on them. But it's hard to go up since mummies are so heavy.

CAMERON: So, they stay down.

JOHN: And then they get stuck. And finally they die of old age.

CAMERON: They go one step . . .

JOHN: One step each decade.

This led to a play episode in which the pair became the mummy robbers and outwitted the false passages inside the

pyramid. With their fingers, John and Cameron traced the passage they had drawn and showed how they would slide the mummy down a passage to get out. While they did this, they sang the theme song to the film *Indiana Jones*. In another episode of play, they imagined themselves sliding down the exterior surface of a pyramid. Cameron elaborated on how tall the tallest pyramid was and how tall it could have been:

They'll get this helicopter. They go . . . they have a whole bunch of mud bricks that they built, load it in the helicopter, then they'll have ropes to load each mud brick and then soon they're so high and then the pyramid is, like, here's the atmosphere, and the pyramid's right here.

An attitude of play also led these boys to discuss what they would do if they received a mummy for their birthday. Their point of discussion was how much the mummy would be worth and how much money they could get for it.

They discussed and evaluated themselves as writers and artists. In one instance, they imagined themselves as the writer and illustrator of the book they were reading and they discussed each other's strengths and weaknesses as writers and artists. John saw himself as the writer and Cameron as the illustrator, but Cameron felt that he wrote faster, so he should be the writer and John should be the illustrator. They also discussed a potential idea for a fictional piece of writing that they wanted to work on at another time.

A concern for length led them to discuss how much they each had written so far. This happened many times. It was important to John that they write the same amount and that Cameron not get too far ahead of him in terms of the number of pages he had written. As they finished composing their text, they became concerned with handwriting, spelling, and other conventions of writing. They reread what they had written and worked on editing and proofreading it; they discussed the syntax of what they had written when it didn't make sense. This copyediting work led to revision.

Overall, John and Cameron's writing was original and fairly sophisticated. They read from their source texts and they wrote, but not simultaneously, so their writing was a rehearsal of what they learned rather than a rewrite of the books they had read. Their writing showed a clear understanding of the subject in most cases, except when they tried to paraphrase too closely from the original as in the example, “The Egyptians were not really a very good military.”

IRA AND LOUIE

Ira and Louie decided to work together because they were friends and because they were both interested in learning more about knights. Ira was an above average reader, reading at least two grade levels above Louie, his partner. Louie was an average first-grade reader, but the texts that were available on knights were not at his reading level. Ira read aloud to Louie, but had Ira been unable to do this, I believe that both of these

students could have learned a great deal from studying the illustrations in the books that I made available to them. Even though Ira read aloud to Louie, their work together was characterized by lots of talk and extensive use of the illustrations in the book as fodder for that talk. For example, they looked for the color of horses that were their favorites, praising those that fit their idea of a good horse and deriding those that didn't.

For Ira and Louie, as for John and Cameron, play was an important mode of interaction with each other and with the text. For example, a typical episode of what might be called interactive reading happened when the text inspired dramatization of the action or the potential action. In the following, the first comment from Louie is his dramatization of the quintain in the text knocking the page off his horse. Then Louie noticed that the weapon pictured in the illustration of the quintain is the same as a weapon pictured in another book. They checked to make sure they had included all of these in their drawings and this led to acting out the motions that would accompany the use of all of the various weapons.

LOUIE: *Whish.* [Acting out what's happening in the book.]

IRA: I know. I know. [Reading from the text.] "The quintain swings around. William is knocked right off his horse." That's gotta hurt when you land.

LOUIE: [Laughs.] That's what is in that book. It's the same. [They're looking at a page with illustrations of weapons.]

IRA: War hammer.

LOUIE: Got that.

IRA: Mace.

LOUIE: Got that.

IRA: Battle-ax.

LOUIE: Got that.

IRA: Spear.

LOUIE: Got that.

IRA: Lance.

LOUIE: Got that. How 'bout we do all the things we have?

IRA: Yeah. We use our spear when we're far away. Or bow and arrow. Or our dagger could throw. Or a war hammer to bop 'em on the head.

LOUIE: *Whunk.*

IRA: Ha. [Reading aloud.] "Here are some of the other weapons that a knight uses: lance, spear, battle-ax, mace, war hammer, dagger, and sword." Knights don't use slingshots. Only peasants use them. Think we need a slingshot?

LOUIE: We have a slingshot. We shoot rocks. Mayday, mayday!

IRA: You are funny. Hit them with the war hammer!
[Laughs for a long time while Louie acts out using different weapons on an imaginary enemy.]

In another play episode, they divided up the shields and other objects that were depicted on a page in the book and took imaginary possession of them.

IRA: I'm going to get that shield.

LOUIE: I'm going to get that one. I hit my shield. *Conk.*

IRA: *Cloing!* [Reading aloud.] "One of the most important pieces is the shields to protect themselves. Each knight puts a special design on his shield. It is called his coat of arms. That way, knights can be told apart even in their armor. After William's father dies, his coat of arms will be passed to William." I get this one.

LOUIE: I get this one. I get these two.

IRA: And I get this one and this one. No. Put that away. This one and that one. You get this one and that one. I get this one and that one.

LOUIE: But here's two more.

IRA: No.

LOUIE: I get the castle. That one and that one.

IRA: You get the castle and the dragon.

LOUIE: No. You don't get one.

IRA: I get this fleur-de-lis thing.

LOUIE: Okay.

Louie and Ira used a wide variety of onomatopoeic words as they interacted: "boom," "whee," "whop," "aaahh," "ack," "swish-swish," "chuh-chuh," "ouch," "tung-pow," "clong," etc. Interacting with the text and with each other through play allowed Ira and Louie an accessible, age-appropriate path into the information they were learning.

Their other main activity was drawing. They drew the objects that interested them most—weapons, shields, helmets, knights, and dragons. They might never have written anything at all if I hadn't required it of them, but it was noteworthy that Ira was the first to suggest that they needed to write in addition to drawing and commenting on the pictures. They began by talking, for the most part, which was interspersed with drawing. Eventually, they began to write, but the time spent drawing and talking was more than that spent writing. Overall, they wrote less than John and Cameron.

Louie's writing took the form of simple sentences that served as labels for pictures. Though he could eloquently describe what he was drawing, he did not write as much as he could say. For example, about a drawing showing two dragons fighting a knight, he told me, "This dragon's on the ground and that one's up in the air and it's going to swoop down on that guy, but his sword can't break, and this dragon is shoot-

ing fire, but it will go *plfff* and then hit the other dragon.” But what he eventually wrote was, “One dragon is on the ground.” What follows is the entire text that Louie wrote. Each slash represents a new page of writing, and each page of writing was accompanied by an elaborate drawing.¹

These are weapons what the knights use. But the knights still
have the weapons./
These knights are fighting with each other./
One dragon is on the ground./
The kids practice being knights./
Dragons in stories have fire to kill knights./
The knights have pretend war. They sit on horses and fight
each other with lances./
Knights steal money from dragons. They give it to the poor./
One guy tied up another guy but the guys’ swords fell
into the ground./
People tell kids dragons and knights stories. They are tales.

Most of these sentences served as labels for the pictures that Louie drew. The writing describes the action going on in his drawing, which served as the catalyst for the writing. This is a normal and appropriate method for young children to follow when writing.

Ira’s writing, on the other hand, offered information in a tone like that found in information books, though he did not copy from his books at all. Reading the books and writing his text were very separate activities. He used books only as sources of images to draw. Many of his sentences also served as labels for his drawing, but some of his text could stand alone and would not need a drawing to make the text comprehensible. The following is the text that Ira wrote. Each slash mark represents a new page.

Swords were used very often when a knight was knocked off
his horse./
These are the helmets that the knights have. The helmets are
made out of metal./
These are the weapons that the knights sometimes use./
Knights from stories fight dragons . . . Well, sometimes. And
save princesses./
Knights fight a lot. Sometimes on horseback and sometimes
on the ground./
Knights save people from dragons in stories. In Saint George,
George kills a dragon. Sir Lancelot fought good. King
Arthur pulled the sword from the stone./
Charge! Many knights did tournaments. They use blunt
weapons. It is a fake battle. They have a feast after that./
Excalibur can break rocks. Excalibur is the best sword.
Excalibur can break any sword./
King Arthur pulled Excalibur from the stone.

Ira’s writing reflects reading that he did at home as well as during our research time at school. At home, he was reading about King Arthur, and his fascination with swords stemmed from that. His text reflects his learning from the texts he read aloud to Louie, as well. He learned about tournaments and

feasting from the texts he read at school. In addition, though Ira and Louie were already familiar with the story in *St. George and the Dragon* by Margaret Hodges (1984), they read another version of the story in another book, and that appeared in their writing as well.

Louie and Ira’s writing was highly original, based on their interaction with both pictures and text in their information sources. They preferred talking and drawing over writing, but their writing was an outgrowth of their talk and drawing.

CARRIE AND ANGIE

Carrie and Angie chose to study mice together. Carrie was a second grader and Angie was a first grader; both were reading at about the third-grade level and their writing abilities were similar as well. They could each sustain a piece of writing on a self-selected topic over a long period of time and over several pages of writing. They agreed to work together and then they chose their topic.

They wrote [about baby mice], “Kid mice hunt for their selfs.”

On the first day of their research, I gave them all the paper they needed and provided them with books. Before reading, Carrie wanted to get started right away by recording one fact that she already knew about mice—that they’re born without any fur. Angie wanted to begin by organizing their blank pages, titling each one according to a sub-topic; she wanted to create sections like those she had seen in other books. Carrie liked the idea, but she wanted to write chapters. Angie insisted that they were to be sections, not chapters. I think Angie understood that the information books she had seen were divided into sections, not chapters, with each section consisting of one large picture and one page of text. Chapters, she believed, were longer and didn’t necessarily have pictures. On the third day of their reading and writing, Angie constructed a table of contents containing the sections she had predetermined based on reading the books and on her own ideas about how to organize the information. She included one section called “Teenagers,” for which she and Carrie never did find information. They also had trouble finding information to fit the category Angie had named “Kids.” In fact, at the end of reading the first book I had given them, Carrie was upset because there seemed to be no information about “kids” (i.e., the life of mice between infancy and adulthood). She said, “Darn it. I read the whole book. There’s nothing about kids in this book. What do we know about kids?” Since the book hadn’t addressed baby mice as a topic, she and Angie decided to write what they already knew about this topic. They wrote, “Kid mice hunt for their selfs. So when they hunt as much as their mother does, they move out of the house and I think that when they are away from home they probably hunt more than their mother.”

When Angie began reading to Carrie, she discovered that, even though they weren't finding information about baby mice, they *were* finding information about what mice eat, which was another of their predetermined categories. So Angie directed Carrie to write down the information she had found about their eating habits:

- ANGIE: Okay, see if you can see anything about kids.
- CARRIE: Okay, here we go.
- ANGIE: [Reading.] "Mice live in fields and meadows. They also live almost anywhere people do."
- CARRIE: What's that sentence again?
- ANGIE: I'm reading. Why aren't you listening? I'll read it again. "Mice live in fields and meadows. They also live almost anywhere people do."
- CARRIE: Stop.
- ANGIE: No, don't write that. We'll do that on Where Mice Live. Because . . .
- CARRIE: I'm trying to [unintelligible] though.
- ANGIE: You're supposed to write things about kids here, okay? [Reading.] "Mice live in fields and meadows. They also live almost anywhere people do. They live in houses, barns, and other buildings. Mice live everywhere except Antarctica. Mice eat grains" . . . Go to what mice eat. 'Cause this is about them eating. Go to what mice eat. What Mice Eat. Right there. Okay. Start where we were. This is all about what they eat. [Reading aloud from text.] "Mice eat grains, nuts, fruit, and seeds."
- CARRIE: Mice eat grains . . .
- ANGIE: Don't copy it! Make it . . .
- CARRIE: Fruit and nuts.
- ANGIE: grains, nuts, and fruit. So write grains. . . . Write nuts . . .
- CARRIE: Grains.
- ANGIE: Nuts, grains . . .
- CARRIE: Grains. Nuts, grain, fruit.
- ANGIE: Yeah. Nuts, grain, fruit.
- CARRIE: Mice eat nuts, grain . . .
- ANGIE: And fruit. Period. This is still about their eating okay? Are you done?
- CARRIE: Yeah.
- ANGIE: "Some eat food crumbs left behind by people. Others eat insects."
- CARRIE: Some . . . mice . . .

- ANGIE: Eat crumbs.
- CARRIE: Eat . . . crumbs . . .
- ANGIE: Period. Others eat insects.
- CARRIE: Other . . . mice . . .
- ANGIE: Eat insects.
- CARRIE: Eat . . . in . . . sects.
- ANGIE: Period. Okay.

When they discussed how much paper they had and how much they could write, Angie's understanding of the process was different than Carrie's. I had given them 20 sheets of paper that were unlined at the top (for picture drawing) and lined at the bottom. Carrie thought they would need to write 20 pages each, but Angie said that they only had to write 10 each and that they didn't have to use all of the paper. (I had explained that they didn't need to use all of the paper and had provided plenty of it so that they wouldn't need to move across the room periodically to get more.) Carrie's suggestion that they write by alternating by lines ("How 'bout you write one row and I write one row?") also showed a different understanding of the process. She later suggested that they alternate reading pages in the book as well. Her idea was that one of them would read a page and the other would write about it, and then they would switch roles. As a way to share the work, this was a good strategy, but Carrie ended up reading the most because Angie was still writing when Carrie wanted to turn the page and read more.

This pair of students was the only pair that expressed any understanding or awareness of audience; they had a sense that they were writing to their future readers. They didn't discuss who those readers were, though, usually, in our class, everyone's writing was available to everyone else, so they may have had a sense of their classmates as the audience for their writing. In the following dialogue, Carrie is the one who raises the subject of audience, but her understanding of their obligation to their readers is not what you might expect:

- CARRIE: [Reading from text.] "They are natural."
- ANGIE: Nocturnal.
- CARRIE: Nocturnal.
- ANGIE: Okay, let me write that.
- CARRIE: That was a short sentence. Very short sentence.
- ANGIE: I know what that means. It means they stay up at night and they sleep during the day.
- CARRIE: Shh!
- ANGIE: Why?
- CARRIE: You don't want to give it away while they're reading!

ANGIE: Yes, we do.
 CARRIE: No, we don't.
 ANGIE: Yes.
 CARRIE: No.

Carrie seemed to think that the technical term nocturnal should not be explained—it would “give it away.” Angie thought they should explain it; nonetheless, in her writing, she did not explain it. I can only surmise why Carrie thought it should not be explained. One reason might be that she (like all readers) had experience with text not fully making sense—she may have thought that texts are not supposed to explain things to the reader. Or she may have thought that it would be more fun for the reader to try to figure it out, like a riddle or puzzle. Angie didn't offer a justification for why they should explain what nocturnal means, but she may have had experience with texts, such as the one they were reading, that did provide definitions for technical terms. The fact that she didn't explain it in her text may be due to constraints on her writing time and not necessarily that she capitulated to Carrie.

Carrie and Angie's writing process was sophisticated overall.

Carrie read long sections of text aloud to Angie, which Angie punctuated with impatient outbursts of “I know, I know” and “I already knew that.” At the end of one particularly long stretch of reading aloud, Angie said, “I don't have anything to write.” It seems to me that she wanted to write something she had *learned*, something new. Though I had modeled for the class many times how you write down what was important about what you had read, I often said, “Let's write what we learned” interchangeably with “What was important about that?” To Angie, for some reason, it seemed okay to write down what they knew before they started reading, but it wasn't okay to write down what they knew if they had also read about it in a book. Carrie had the impulse to write what she didn't already know. In the middle of reading a long section aloud to Angie, Carrie stopped at a part about which she said, “That's so cool. I'm going to write that down.” Even though, at the time, her role was that of reader, she was interested enough in the information that she stopped to write it down. I believe that the information was new to her and that was what made it compelling.

Carrie and Angie's writing process was sophisticated overall. Their organizing principle, embodied in their table of contents, showed that they understood an important convention of information writing. Calling their pages of writing “sections” rather than “chapters” also showed an understanding of what information writing can look like; though they never said it,

I'm sure that they associated chapters with fiction. In general, Angie seemed to understand information writing better than Carrie did. For example, Carrie wanted to write “Mickey Mouse is cute” after reading a sentence in their text about how Mickey Mouse is cute but most people don't find mice cute. Angie seemed to know that Carrie's suggestion was inappropriate and she didn't want Carrie to write it down. Also, Carrie wanted to decorate their table of contents page, but Angie said, “Most people leave it plain.” Finally, the majority of their writing was condensed or paraphrased from the books they had read. Here are some samples of their writing:

Babies

When mice are born they have no fur. They stay in the den until they have fur. Young mice are fed by their mom. Mice are nocturnal. Mice's whiskers help them. Their whiskers help to tell them how big a hole is. Moms can give birth as often as 8 times a year. A litter can span up from triplets to elevenets.

Kids

Kid mice hunt for their selfs. So when they hunt as much as their mother does they move out of the house. And I think that when they are away from home they probably hunt more than their mother.

What Mice Eat

Mice eat nuts, grain and fruit. Some mice eat crumbs. Other mice eat insects.

What Mice Look Like

Mice look like this. The baby mice are pink and don't have tails when they are babies.

How People Like Mice

People like mice a lot. Some people keep them for pets. When mice show up in houses, they can be a pest. Mice are very small mammals. They have hairy tails. A mouse's tail will be about 5 inches.

Where Mice Live

Mice live everywhere except Antarctica. It is too cold for mice. House mice live in houses and buildings.

Different Kinds of Mice

There are different kinds of mice. One kind is the house mouse. Another mouse is the sewer rat.

The Difference about Mice and Rats

Rats are bigger than mice. People don't like rats because they give them diseases. And then they get very very sick. Scientists test things for people on mice and rats.

CAROLE AND LISA

Carole and Lisa were both first graders who had begun the year as nonreaders, but by spring, when they worked together on this project, they both were reading above grade level. They

chose to read and write about dolphins. They read by taking turns, each reading a page at a time. They did not discuss what they read, but they made occasional comments such as, “Oh, that’s cool.” They were quick to correct each other’s reading.

Carole was the first to mention writing: “Are we ever going to do any writing?” She said this on the first day, after they had read for about 15 minutes, but she didn’t wait for Lisa to reply. She just kept on reading. After about five more minutes, she said, “How ’bout we write a little bit?” Carole began by writing about where dolphins live, while Lisa wrote about what they eat.

Carole also expressed a desire to know if dolphins had eggs. She found the answer right away when she read that when the baby dolphin is born alive, its mother pushes it to the surface of the water to breathe. She wrote down this information right away, even though that meant putting it on her page about where dolphins live. Then she continued to focus on where they live and asked Lisa if she should write more about that or write something else. When Lisa didn’t reply, Carole decided to read about common dolphins.

The next day, she wrote about common dolphins, though all of what she wrote she copied word for word, from the book. Later, in the editing stages of publishing their information book, I asked Carole and Lisa to go back and rewrite the section on common dolphins. They were able, at that time, to rewrite it in a way that better demonstrated their comprehension of the information. Their rewriting also sounded more authentic to them than the sophisticated syntax Carole had copied verbatim from the book. This is the text Carole had copied: “Common dolphins have black backs or capes and a white belly. Long yellowish patches run along the dolphin’s sides.” They rewrote this as: “Common dolphins have yellow patches on their sides. They have black backs.”

Lisa and Carol shared the writing task at times. For example, Carole would write the first sentence and then turn the writing over to Lisa. They were very aware of the need to write using their own words, but they stuck close to the text. They mined the book for writing ideas, again sticking closely to the text, referring to it while writing, and ultimately writing text that was too close to the original. They used the book to help them spell words like “usually” and “calf.” They didn’t seem to be able to back away from the text far enough to take ownership of the ideas and put them in their own words. For example, after finishing the section on babies, Carole went looking for another topic.

CAROLE: Whoa! Lisa, look. These are untamed dolphins, but all dolphins are nice. What should we do? How does a dolphin swim? Yeah, this sounds like a good one. [*Reading from the text.*] “Dolphins usually swim about three to seven miles per hour—about as fast as you ride on your bike.” Okay. So, and that’s a period. So, let’s write what we just heard. Well, what we learned. Okay?

Okay, I’m gonna read that again. Is this the book that we were reading? Dolphins . . . Remember, each period. Dolphins . . . Oh, what is that title called? Hold it up. How . . . does . . . a . . . dolphin . . . swim. That’s the main words. Hold on, let me see something. [*Reading from the text.*] “Dolphins usually swim three to seven miles per hour.” I better do it before I forget. Dolphins . . . usually . . . Okay, let me see that again. [*Reading from the text.*] “Dolphins usually swim about three to seven miles per hour.” Usually swim . . . three . . . to . . . seven . . . miles . . . per . . . hour. Like . . . your . . . bike. Okay, now read.

LISA: What should I read?

CAROLE: Read right here.

LISA: [*Reading from the text.*] “For short . . .”

CAROLE: Bursts.

LISA: [*Reading from the text.*] “bursts they can swim faster—as fast as twenty two miles per hour.”

CAROLE: Huh? But that said 3 to 7 miles per hour. No, this is the same book. Maybe some of them swam 3 to 7 miles per hour and some of them 22 miles per hour.

LISA: Probably a different kind of dolphin.

CAROLE: No, no, Lisa. Sometimes they just do it that. . . . Yeah. Different dolphins. Read it out loud! I cannot hear! Are you done reading up here?

LISA: Yeah.

CAROLE: No, you didn’t say slowly, did you.

LISA: I did say slowly.

CAROLE: [*Reading from the text.*] “For short bursts they can swim faster—as fast as 22 miles per hour.” Now read! Oh, it’s my turn! “That is about the speed of a car moving slowly.” Okay, now you have to write that down. Then you read again.

Writing while reading led Carol and Lisa to copying in this section. They didn’t copy every word, but they copied long phrases and left out some text.

One day, Carole was absent, and so Lisa read and wrote without her. She wrote a section called “Dolphins in Danger” about tuna companies trying not to catch dolphins. When Carole came back, she asked Lisa where she had left off. Lisa’s answer refers to the text that she wrote, but the answer Carole was looking for was where Lisa left off in the book she was reading and using as a basis for writing. The following conversation reveals to me that Carole was the one who was concerned

with the source text, while Lisa was oriented toward the text she had written.

- CAROLE: So where did you leave off?
- LISA: I left off at “most people.”
- CAROLE: Did you copy that?
- LISA: No.
- CAROLE: Are you sure?
- LISA: I just wrote “most people love dolphins” and then it said “Yet, blah blah blah . . .”
- CAROLE: Oh, yeah, you’re right. Okay, so where did you stop?
- LISA: Where the period that I put? Oh, children. [Reading her own writing.] “Many tuna companies are careful not to catch dolphins.” And then there’s a period.
- CAROLE: So where is that on here [i.e., in the source text]?
- LISA: Right here.
- CAROLE: This is where you left off?
- LISA: Uh huh.
- CAROLE: [Reading from source.] “. . . are careful not to catch dolphins in their nets. You can tell companies are careful by the dolphin safe seal on the tuna can.”

Though they wrote with the book in mind and in sight and often copied from it, they were knowledgeable about dolphins and occasionally expressed that. But none of their own background knowledge came through in their writing. Nor did they demonstrate much ability to synthesize. They wanted to write about mothers and babies, but they were only focused on one text at a time. It was a linear process for them. They read and wrote about one book, then the next, and then the next. Unlike John and Cameron who often synthesized across sources, once Lisa and Carole read and wrote about a book, they were done with it and didn’t go back to it without encouragement.

- TEACHER: Okay. All right, we’ll see what you can do about the babies taking milk from their moms.
- CAROL: Okay.
- TEACHER: What does it say in this book?
- CAROL: It does have . . .
- TEACHER: Mother and babies.
- CAROL: There’s babies. Yeah, this is mothers and babies.
- TEACHER: It tells how much they weigh, how long they are. It never says though, that part about the mammals. I remember you guys reading this

the first day. About how, yeah, here, [reading from the text] “mammal mothers feed their babies with milk from their bodies. Dolphin milk is very rich. It has lots of protein and vitamins that help the baby dolphin grow quickly.”

- LISA: That’s from another book.
- TEACHER: Yeah, but doesn’t that have to do with mothers and babies? It’s okay if you take information from one part and put it with another part.
- CAROL: Okay let’s read it. [Reading from the text.] “Mammal mothers feed their babies with milk from their bodies.”
- LISA: [Reading from the text.] “Dolphin milk is very rich.”
- CAROL: [Reading from the text.] “It has lots of protein and vitamins that help the baby dolphin grow quickly.” Let’s write . . .
- LISA: That the milk is very rich.
- CAROL: No. Be quiet. I’m trying to think. The . . . baby . . . dolphin . . . gets . . . milk . . . from . . . its . . . mother. The . . . milk . . . has . . . lots . . . of . . . protein . . . and . . . vitamins. Period. Okay there.

Once I showed them the connection between two of their source texts, they saw this connection and added the information. They would not have done this independently.

Perhaps what kept Lisa and Carole from writing with more originality was a desire to be correct, which also manifested itself in how they quickly corrected each other’s oral reading. Or perhaps their reading ability outstripped their ability to process the source text and write about it. Another possibility is that they didn’t care enough about their topic. Their interaction while reading was limited; they didn’t discuss the material. They didn’t play with it the way Ira and Louie had, neither did they elaborate on it through conversation the way Cameron and John had. They read and they wrote, and that was all. At one point, Lisa said, “I have a lot more ideas. I just want to get finished.”

Lisa and Carole had intended not to copy as they wrote, and they hoped to tell me what I wanted to hear—that they were closing the book and writing down what they had learned. But ultimately, they couldn’t or didn’t actually do that. They wrote with the book open, referring to it frequently, rereading the passage they were trying to “rewrite.” As a result, their written product was less successful than that of Ira and Louie, Cameron and John, or Angie and Carrie.

CONCLUSIONS

Distance from the source texts combined with immersion in the content led to better writing. John and Cameron as well as Ira and Louie were able to distance themselves from the texts they were using. They did this through discussion of the content,

through evaluative comments about their own drawings and those in the books they were using, and through imaginative play with the text. They became deeply involved in the content, but didn't become bound to the source text. It is interesting to note that both of these pairs of students chose topics of history, rather than science. Perhaps the human element in history made their topics more accessible and interesting.

Angie with Carrie and Carole with Lisa wrote simpler, less original texts. They were less immersed in the content of those chosen topics and at the same time less distanced from the source texts they were reading. That is, they rarely wrote without reading from the source text first. They didn't discuss the content of their reading in much detail and they didn't "play" with the content. Angie and Carrie did impose their own original structure on the information they wanted to present, and that led to better, more sophisticated writing. Carole and Lisa, by contrast, got their organizing principles from their source books by copying subtopic headings from the books themselves.

All four of these pairs of students were successful in many ways. They read, they wrote, they learned, and though self-directed, they were rarely off-task. They were able to study a topic of interest to them, thus making their schooling experience more relevant and meaningful. They also produced a piece of writing for classroom publication and were able to keep it as documentation of their learning and their work together. Their work occurred during the time we devoted to science and social studies, but reading, writing, talking, and listening were crucial to the learning process. They saw themselves as experts, and they were able to see firsthand how important reading and writing were in their process of becoming experts.

Though my students were comfortable with expressive writing, they were equally comfortable with writing information text. Contrary to Cazden's (1993) findings, they read and gathered graphic information from their source books and wrote information pieces that went beyond fact-based, encyclopedia-like rehearsals of surface knowledge. If, as Donovan (1997) suggests, lack of experience with nonnarrative texts in the early grades leads to poor performance with reading and writing nonnarrative texts in the later grades, then the experience that these students had should give them a stronger foundation upon which to build their expository writing ability. As teachers, we need to incorporate more reading and writing of information, rather than letting "story" dominate the curriculum. ●

Note

1. I keyboarded the students' writing, conventionalizing spelling and mechanics.

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Sylvia Read is a second-grade teacher in the Cache County Schools and teaches reading methods courses for the Department of Elementary Education at Utah State University.