

Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 5

Issue 1 Focus: *The Teacher-Researcher*

Article 3

1-1-1989

Simple Listening or Developing Competencies: A Teacher's Look at the "All About" Book

Hilary Ferguson

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Ferguson, Hilary (1989) "Simple Listening or Developing Competencies: A Teacher's Look at the "All About" Book," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1685>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

SIMPLE LISTING OR DEVELOPING
COMPETENCIES:
A TEACHER'S LOOK AT THE "ALL ABOUT" BOOK

Hilary Ferguson

When I was the Friend of the Week!
Sarah

My Dad came to read to us
My Dad read I Had Trouble in Getting to SollaSolla
I got to Take the attendance Down to the office
I Brought Pictures in and put them on the Bulletin Board
I cleaned the coats
I got interviewed
Miss Ferguson made a Book for me

When I Was the Friend of the Week
Sarah

My dad came to read to us.
My dad read I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Solla.
I got to take the attendance down to the office.
I brought pictures in and put them on the bulletin board.
I cleaned the coats.
I got interviewed.
Miss Ferguson made a book for me.

As a primary grade teacher I knew stories like Sarah's were the result of hard work and were written in what is often the "genre" of choice for young writers and popular with the first grade readers in my classroom. Yet I had heard such stories dismissed as "just those all about books" and treated as a phase children tend to go through before "real writing" starts. However, Newkirk suggests that this "generally accepted low estimate of children's abilities" is a function of a model of children's writing which sees it as "deficient adult writing" and challenges us to adopt "another angle of vision" so that we may see the "competence of children" as writers (142).

That challenge became the focus of my action research. Initially I wanted to find out what kinds of writing first graders employ when given

regular time to write in a workshop setting. I read and then classified by genre each piece of writing composed during the first semester by the twenty first graders with whom I worked last year. During that research and related professional reading this question was refined to focus on the "all about" genre of young writers and how they can become competent as writers within it.

By carefully looking at first graders' stories I saw evidence of their growth as writers, even those who were writing within the "all about" genre. Newkirk might define my looking as "an incremental viewpoint which examines the approximations children successfully attempt" (142). Approximations in the "all about" genre are leading young writers toward competence as writers, particularly of exposition (Sowers 75; Newkirk 142). Just as we have learned to view children's invented spelling as approximations toward the conventional spelling, my research confirms for me that we can indeed view the "all about" books young children write as approximations toward conventional expository forms. Moreover, some "all about" stories by first grade writers seem to be approximations toward accomplished writing irrespective of genre.

Sowers was the first to identify stories like Sarah's as "all about" books: "An 'all about' piece of writing often has the phrase 'all about' in the title and consists of a listlike collection of facts, features, and attributes of its subject" (73). The story "Loving Goldfish" written in October by one of my first graders, Stephanie, is another example of this kind of writing:

Loveing Goldfih
by Stephanie

You haf to fed goldfih
You hav to clene goldfishs tanke
Goldfishs or orge and wite and some er juste orge
fish nede sleep to
You shod just fede thim wuse a day but sumetimes you fede
this tuas a day
You shod cepe the wotre a strint tamprihsr and htat is all

Loving Goldfish
by Stephanie

*You have to feed goldfish.
You have to clean goldfish's tank.
Goldfish are orange and white, and some are just orange.
Fish need sleep too.
You should just feed them once a day,
but sometimes you feed then twice a day.
You should keep the water a certain temperature. And that is all.*

Stephanie's title certainly could have been "All About Loving Goldfish"; in her story she lists the features of that behavior. She has learned enough about focus and details to be able to write her piece, but all of her focused, detailed statements (except the last one, "And that is all.") could have been listed in any order without changing the meaning of the story. However, the traditional focus on this "randomness of form" of the "all about" book has prevented us from seeing "the student's real achievement" (Newkirk 129). Stephanie's achievement was in her ability to select the information that was part of her story and leave out everything else.

Newkirk, if he read Stephanie's story, might suggest that despite her arbitrary order Stephanie "does successfully maintain the division between information which does relate to the topic and information which does not" (129). Stephanie is growing toward competence as a writer. As Annie Dillard points out, "The writer of any work, and particularly any nonfiction work, must decide two crucial points: What to put in and what to leave out" (55). When she wrote "Loving Goldfish" Stephanie, at age six, experienced making that decision as a writer and succeeded.

Other six-year-old writers also experienced making that writer's decision. Of the 578 pieces of writing composed by the first graders in my room during the first five months of writing workshop, 255 of them fell into the "all about" book category. While Sowers found many more "all about" books than narratives published at the beginning of the year (75), I found a balance in the kinds of books selected for publication each month. The only exception was October, when "all about" books on Halloween or holidays were the "hot topics."

KINDS OF PUBLISHED BOOKS

	"All About"	Personal Narrative	Fiction
September	6	10	3
October	12	3	5
November	7	7	7
January	8	8	5

Not only is "all about" a common style of writing for young children, as these beginning readers explore many concept books, much of what they read

is written in an "all about" mode. Newkirk points out that "the child has access to 'demonstrations' of listmaking in concept books" (132). Books like *A First Look at Dinosaurs, Sharks, and Fill It Up! All about Service Stations* serve as models of these inventories of information. They become examples of "all about" books that first grade writers read. And young writers not only write about what they read, but imitate it as well.

Lindsay, a reader, wrote the following piece:

my hans can do thising
by Lindsay
The had book
to Krista

The things my hans can do aer moov and hit
The things my hans can do aer pat and caree
The thing my hans can do aer dro
The End

My Hands Can Do Things
by Lindsay
The Hand Book
to Krista

The things my hands can do are move and hit.
The things my hands can do are pat and carry.
The thing my hands can do is draw.
The End.

Lindsay's mother told me that this piece was similar to a library book that they had read at home and suggested that Lindsay was imitating the book. How can "all about" books written by young children be dismissed as a phase when they are reading such books, known as concept books when written by adult authors, from the library?

As the months of the semester passed and these first graders grew as writers, there were changes in the "all about" books they wrote. Topics were deliberately selected because authors had specific information they wanted to share with their readers. After reading about animals, Eric wrote to share his information with classmates. He used a more complex structure (chapters), which he discovered in a book he was reading, *The One in the Middle is the Green Kangaroo*, by Judy Blume, to organize his "all about" animals book:

LANGUAGE ARTS JOURNAL OF MICHIGAN

Anumols

by Eric

Jan 13 1988

Deducatete to my sisdter and mom and dad

Captur one

Reptols

wen a lisards tail folls off he gros a nather one and he easts
plants.

wne a radol snak dise someone they nuty boye
and he eats plants too but he eats mise, rabets, frogs and
brds too.

Chapder Two

mamols

PePol are mamols.

cows are mamols

They eat gras and hey.

billy Goats are mamols

they eat gras, tubneko, and other things like clos.

Chapder three

birds

birds make nest.

they ley eggs.

they need wigs or they can't fly

they eat bugs.

Animals

January 13, 1988

Dedicated to my sister and mom and dad

Chapter One

Reptiles

When a lizard's tail falls off, he grows another one.

He eats plant.

When a rattlesnake bites someone, they might die.

*And he eats plant too, but he eats mice, rabbits, frogs and
birds, too.*

Chapter Two

Mammals

People are mammals.

Cows are mammals.

They eat grass and hay.

Billy goats are mammals.

They eat grass, tobacco, and other things like clothes.

Chapter Three

Birds

Birds make nests.

They lay eggs.

They need wings or they can't fly.

They eat bugs.

Although Eric organized his information under three headings— Reptiles, Mammals, and Birds— within each of these chapters the information was

presented in a random fashion. This structure by grouping is an extension of the "all about" book (Newkirk 133). Eric is growing as a writer. In dealing with his inventory of pieces of information about animals, Eric was able to cluster certain pieces together into meaningful chunks. This clustering helps Eric's reader make sense of the information in his "all about" animals book.

The growing writing competence of another of my young students, Krista, was apparent even in her "all about" book. Her story, a list of the features of the dinosaurs' Christmas, also included elements of fiction as well as a knowledge of dinosaurs.

Dinosaurs Christmas
by Krista

Dinosaurs have Christmas.
Dinosaurs have fun at Christmas.
Christmas is good for Dinosaurs.
Dinosaurs like Christmas.
Triceratops get's a pair of vampire teeth.
Stegosaurus get's plants.
Ankylosaurus get's armor.
Dinosaurs get presents at Christmas.

Dinosaurs' Christmas
by Krista

Dinosaurs have Christmas.
Dinosaurs have fun at Christmas.
Christmas is good for dinosaurs.
Dinosaurs like Christmas.
Tyrannosaurus gets a pair of vampire teeth.
Stegosaurus gets plants.
Ankylosaurus gets armor.
Dinosaurs get presents at Christmas.

The subject itself is fiction— that of the dinosaurs celebrating Christmas— and Krista lists the features of this event in "all about" form, but also uses her knowledge about dinosaurs to cleverly plan the gifts so they are suitable for their recipients. The "all about" book seems to provide this young writer with a comfort zone that allows her the flexibility to experiment and take risks. Newkirk sees the writers of "all about" books growing "toward mature expository prose" (142). Krista's piece suggests that she is growing toward effective narrative, even within the "all about" genre.

As a result of this research I am convinced that I should continue to allow my young writers to develop within this "genre" rather than pushing

them on to "real writing" if they are choosing to write "all about" books. Being "pushed on" diminishes the potential found in the "all about" books as a flexible, comfortable structure in which young writers can grow in competence. Some young writers begin with the "all about" structure, but then extend their efforts within that structure as they learn to focus their writing, organize their information, and create fiction.

Works Cited

- Blume, Judy. *The One in the Middle is the Green Kangaroo*. Scarsdale, NY: Bradbury Press, 1981.
- Dillard, Annie. "To Fashion a Text." *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. William Zinsser. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1987. 53-76.
- Gibbons, Gale. *Fill It Up! All About Service Stations*. New York: Crowell, 1985.
- Newkirk, Thomas. "The Non-narrative Writing of Young Children." *Research in the Teaching of English*, 21.2 (1987):121-144.
- Petty, Kate. *Sharks*. New York: Franklin Watts, 1985.
- Selsam, Millicent E. *A First Look at Dinosaurs*. New York: Walker and Company, 1984.
- Seuss, Dr. *I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew*. New York: Random, 1965.
- Sowers, Susan. "The Story and the 'All About' Book." *Breaking Ground: Teachers Relate Reading and Writing in the Elementary School*, ed. Jane Hansen, Thomas Newkirk, and Donald Graves. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books, 1985. 73-82.

Hilary Ferguson teaches first grade at Adams Elementary School in Midland, Michigan