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WRITE TO READ: THE LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE

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Writing instruction at all levels of student development should focus on and nurture the individual's confidence in using his native language. The teacher who provides students with opportunities to explore their own perceptions, their own experience in their writing and reading, can build language confidence and competence. To accomplish this, the teacher must look first at students as individuals with a wealth of interests and enthusiasm and a desire for expressing these to others. The teacher must listen and then provide the environment in which students can explore these interests using language—speaking it, writing it, hearing it, and then reading it.

The elementary student provides the clues for language learning that English teachers at the secondary and college levels should observe with greatest interest. When the child enters school and becomes socially adapted to his peers and to his responsibilities and opportunities as an individual in a learning, exploring community, he begins to display a distinctive identity. Soon he becomes comfortable in the school environment and wishes to share his identity with his peers and his teacher.

The elementary student often reveals this desire through a highly developed facility with experience-based oral language. Consider the following example.

At the close of school on Tuesday, the teacher reminds her students, "Please don't forget to bring something for 'show and tell' tomorrow morning—make it something interesting for us to hear about." As soon as Mark enters his home after school, he asks his mother to remind him to bring something for "show and tell" tomorrow. Before bedtime, Mark works on his bedroom floor among the rubble of wrinkled newspapers, model cement, small plastic spheres and angles, the printed directions (accompanied by diagrams) of his latest project—a model of a space missile. Using one of last summer's saved popsicle sticks, he cements pieces together, reads, frowns, holds parts in place, kneels away from, moves toward, and, in general, assesses each step in the process of building the model spacecraft. Soon, bedtime is announced. He surveys his work approvingly and after he has boasted for a moment to his mother, his lights are turned out and he falls asleep.

In the morning as Mark is on his way out the kitchen door, holding his "Peanuts" lunch box and munching the last half of a piece of toast, his mother reminds him of "show and tell." Two tense seconds pass while Mark stands with the toast poised against tight, thoughtful lips. Then, he bolts to

his bedroom and grabs a one-inch section of the plastic model from the floor. Returning, he peers up at his mother; “Got a bag?” he asks, grinning.

“You’re going to take *that* thing?—my heavens!” she frowns, but not too seriously. “What in the world can you say about that?” she asks, smiling. Mark places the small plastic piece into the bag and gulps down the last bit of toast. Smiling up at his mother, he says, simply, “Lots!” And he’s off to school, lunch box swinging from one hand and a little brown bag of his *own experience* in his other hand. He knows what he’ll talk about during “show and tell.” He’ll talk and talk and talk. Finally, his teacher will dismiss him politely, “Thank you so much, Mark—that is a wonderful project and you told about it in a really interesting manner.”

In this type of activity the alert teacher can capitalize on students’ motivation and interests and work on both writing and reading skills. The teacher can have the “show and tell” reports written by the students individually, if they are old enough, or recorded as each student delivers his report. Later, the teacher or an aide can type these into a class booklet for reading instruction. Whichever procedure the teacher chooses, the students will enter the experience of using language for discovery, and what they will discover is that language is within their reach as an effective tool of expression. Students also will discover that the written or printed word grows out of the spoken and heard word. As James Squire suggests:

. . . For too long our schools have neglected the importance of oral language and failed to recognize that ability in written language relates in no small measure to facility and command of oral forms. For too long school programs designed to teach our children to read have been separated from those designed to teach them to write and speak.¹

Following through on the “show and tell”—or any other similar experience-oriented language activity—the teacher can bring students through the writing process and reap for the students additional, complementary language benefits. For example, students can be guided through the *Prewriting*, *Writing*, and *Rewriting* process as both writing instruction and highly motivated reading activity. If writing and reading together evolve from the student’s experience, the reading of the student is not viewed as alien material, cast immutably on the printed page for all time. Instead, reading material is understood to be human material, created by and for human beings—indeed, created by the student himself and his peers. It is not a great distance from this conception of reading by students to the broader, necessary conception of reading material as an essential academic and life-enriching medium. Carol Chomsky, commenting on this process, says, “. . . to expect the child to read, as a first

¹ James R. Squire, “Foreword,” in James Moffett, *A Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum, Grades K-13*. Houghton Mifflin, 1968.

step, what someone else has written is backwards, an artificial imposition that denies the child an active role in the whole process.”²

When the student explores the writing process, using his own experience and his own language, the teacher can – at any level of instruction – offer stimulating and worthwhile reading instruction. The student of writing, for whom *Prewriting* becomes part of the process of producing the written, learns numerous concepts that are applicable to both writing and reading. He learns that there is no frightening magic in printed words, for each writer explores his own experience, knowledge, and perceptions, and makes choices of materials suitable to his point and suitable to his audience. The student involved in writing as a process receives the necessary feedback about these choices from his peers and his teacher, who constitute his audience of the moment. He gathers materials and tries a variety of language in efforts to express himself, to communicate his meaning. This constant search for the revealing fact, the revealing anecdote, and the process of selecting, trying, rejecting, adapting language – getting the words right – are invaluable insights for any reader of any reading material. The printed word becomes understandable as a final choice of the writer and not as a mandate from the adult world.

When the writing student is brought through the *Writing* stage in the process of creating a composition, he writes his rough draft to discover, through a preliminary exploration of his material, his own understanding and his own perceptions. He writes in his own words. Then he reads his draft. He sees the beginning of his meaning. He substitutes words, adjusts sentences, perhaps even adds a paragraph or two. He is learning to read with the maker’s eye, the eye of the producer. Rather than merely reading the products, i.e., the “reading skills” book, or, in more advanced levels, reading the “literature” book, the student engages in total, personal language activity. As a consequence, his reading and language skills are sharpened along with his writing skills.

During the *Rewriting* process the student sharpens his preliminary drafts and works toward his final product. When his statement is finished to his satisfaction, he has experienced both the writing process and a significant and valuable reading lesson. He has read as an editor reads.

This approach to synthesizing reading and writing instruction works with equal success on all levels, for the common denominator is the student’s own language and experience. Using the learner’s language and experience to build a bridge to other experiences that challenge but do not intimidate his use of language provides the key for unlocking the complex process of discovery leading to the mastery of the writing and reading processes.

² Carol Chomsky, “Write First, Read Later,” *Childhood Education*, 47:296, March 1971.