

The Wishing Crystal: Joint construction in the junior-primary classroom

BRONWYN PARKIN

Reality TV might have a use after all, as one teacher discovered when she reviewed a guided story-writing lesson.



One of the big challenges for many children when they begin school is becoming familiar with written texts. At first, many do not anticipate the grammatical patterns and word choices that accompany written language, and which make written language so different from spoken language. It's for this reason that young students need varying degrees of *scaffolding* — teacher and peer support that enables them to gain increasing control over literate discourse.

With this in mind, I joined a literacy-research team that set out to trial the effectiveness of an educational approach that aims to scaffold literacy learning (see panel). I worked with a class of 25 Reception/Year 1 students, including four Aboriginal students. We wanted to see how we could use the Scaffolded Literacy pedagogy, devised by Brian Gray from the University of Canberra, to develop the group's:

- understanding of genre construction
- decoding and spelling skills
- understanding of authors' choices in text construction
- skills in critical analysis
- construction of texts.

Conducted at Salisbury North R-7 School in Adelaide, the Deadly Writin', Readin' and Talkin' Project aimed to "significantly improve the literacy skills of the Aboriginal students in our school in a short time" (DEETYA, 1998). To achieve this, project participants applied the pedagogical processes of Scaffolded Literacy, a program devised by Brian Gray from the University of Canberra (Rose, Gray & Cowey, 1999).

Exploring a model

I chose *The Wishing Well* (Lobel, 1972) as the focus text for the classroom. This text has an evident generic structure, pictures that clearly contribute meaning, and a literary (rather than oral) style. So, while the story is simple, it provides useful access into the literary world.

We worked for several weeks on the text. For example, we talked about its structure: how Lobel introduced the story (orientation); where the problem began (complication); and how the problem was solved (resolution). We looked at the illustrations, and how they portrayed the main character. We worked at the sentence level — studying, for example, the sentence ‘This may help’ and discussing why Lobel chose ‘may’ instead of ‘will’. We looked at the speech marks he used to show when the mouse talked, and the exclamation mark to show when she was excited. We looked at how ‘mouse’ and ‘found’ both had ‘ou’ in the middle, and how ‘wish’ and ‘wishes’ were different. After seven weeks of close study, four times a week, all students were able to reproduce some part of the text and discuss aspects that they understood.

Then came the final challenge. I wanted to construct a class text using the literary structure of *The Wishing Well* — negotiating a writing plan and writing the story in small groups. Such a text would give me a better idea of how much the students had understood about the generic structure of a narrative. More particularly, I wanted to see whether the students had come to understand that authors make choices, conscious or otherwise, when they construct a text. I hoped, from our weeks of discussion, that the students understood that authors’ choices show their intentional influence on readers’ understanding and emotions. This might seem a sophisticated understanding for six- and seven-year-olds, but I believe it is a crucial part of seeing reading as a social transaction.

Planning construction

We began the process by planning our story together. I suggested that we could write our own story about someone finding something magical to wish on. As a class, we spent an hour deciding the characters in the story, the setting, the magical ‘thing’, the problem that might arise, and how the problem might be solved. These decisions were recorded on a text plan that was organised according to the simplified staging of a

narrative text: orientation, complication, resolution. We translated these stages as ‘introducing the characters’, ‘the problem’, ‘how the problem gets solved’. By the end of the lesson, we knew that the main character would be a boy called Ryan who would find a wishing crystal in the bush. The problem would be that rubbing the crystal made it burn — a problem that would be resolved by Ryan rubbing the crystal under water.

I realised that, in itself, the completed text would not tell me all that I wanted to know about how well the students had understood what we were doing together. So I determined to videotape and transcribe the next lesson. I could then look over the transcript with four key questions in mind:

- Where are the opportunities for students to make choices as authors?
- How do I deal with their suggestions and opinions?
- How do particular students share in taking control of the text?
- What have I learned about negotiating texts with this group?

Where are the opportunities for students to make choices as authors?

To negotiate the construction of the text, I divided the class into groups of six. Over the next couple of lessons, each group would read what the previous groups had written. Referring to the previously recorded text plan, they would continue the story where the previous group left off.

The plan that we’d made the previous day gave us the generic staging for the story, and a general understanding of the meaning. The task for this lesson was to elaborate on that writing plan. Much of the time with each group was spent in negotiation: recalling the text plan, making authors’ decisions about the story line, and choosing the text to express those decisions. The remainder of the time was spent with students taking turns to write sections of the text and discussing spelling.

Negotiating a text with six- and seven-year-old children requires a great deal of thinking on the spot. Sometimes I was lost for words. Sometimes I missed opportunities to include those children most marginalised by school. Sometimes, though, I ‘got it right’, as I’ll explain.

How do I deal with students' suggestions and opinions?

This question highlights an inherent tension for the teacher: the desire to acknowledge, value and use students' offerings while maintaining the pace of the lesson so that they do not get tired or fed up with the process. I discovered that I didn't always treat students' ideas with sufficient consideration. Sometimes this was through poor listening; sometimes it was because I was too worried about moving on; at other times there was 'interactive trouble' (Freebody, Ludwig & Gunn, 1995) — communication difficulties and breakdowns. Some of this 'interactive trouble' involved occasions when I did not respond in ways that affirmed or encouraged students' contributions.

Having looked carefully at the transcripts, I've identified some possible explanations for these communication difficulties that might help me in similar situations in the future.

Recall

I now realise that I'd made one major error in beginning this lesson. We had planned the story the day before, and recorded our writing plan on the board in the classroom. Unfortunately, I had moved my small group to a withdrawal room so that it would be quiet for video-recording, and I had no copy of the plan with me. Among other things, this meant that students offered suggestions that had been rejected the previous day. I found that I had to remind them repeatedly of decisions that had been made. Had we been able to refer to the writing plan, the conversation might have proceeded in a different way, crossing off steps as we went.

World knowledge

Although the whole class had decided that our main character, Ryan, would find the crystal in the bush, it became apparent that many of these very urban children were unfamiliar with the notion of 'the bush'. At the point where the crystal was to be taken under water, one student suggested that Ryan should take the crystal home. However, I thought it would be a fine idea for Ryan to find a nice water hole or creek on site. As a way of focusing students' thinking, I asked where they might find water in the bush. The question triggered a sharing of students' own experiences in the bush (real or otherwise).

Teacher But there's a problem because he's in the bush and there aren't any taps in the bush. Where would you find water in the bush? Have you ever been out in the bush?

Joey I have.

Andrew A very long time ago when I was a baby we went there and had a fire.

Teacher You could take it to a water hole or a creek.

Leila When I was a little baby ...

Teacher No, Leila, it's Andrew's turn, then you can put your hand up.

Andrew Once, when I was three, we, we had, we had one side at the back yard, one side of woods and, um, and um, in the bush we found the pond and, um, I found a crystal and I went swimming.

Teacher Okay, so we could have a ... you could call it a pond but you don't call it a pond when it's in the bush — you call it a water hole.

Joey Crystal.

There were two further accounts of experiences with ponds and crystals, but none about the bush. It's apparent to me now that the students' knowledge of the bush was too sparse to keep Ryan and his crystal there for long. I think now that this was simply a chance for students to integrate new knowledge with old — to expand their world view. Perhaps this sort of input didn't require much response from me as the teacher. The next time someone suggested that Ryan take the crystal home, I dropped my agenda and jumped at the suggestion.

Logics

When there are six small individuals in a group, and each needs to make some contribution to the story as well as feel some ownership of it, things can get tricky. One of the first episodes in this lesson left me floundering. We had just reached the complication stage in the story.

Teacher We've already rubbed the crystal; we've already rubbed the crystal and the crystal said "Ouch, that burns". So what's he going to do now? What do you think?

Leila He thinks, he thinks.

Teacher He doesn't think.

(I want Ryan to get on with solving the problem.)

Leila He says: "My god, I want a wish".

- Teacher* He says: “My god, I want a wish”.
(How am I going to respond to this?)
- Leila* Yes. “Please may I have a wish.”
(I leave a long pause here. The group is laughing.)
- Teacher* So Ryan thinks ...
(I’m trying to buy thinking time.)
- Leila* Do you know how to write ‘god’?
- Teacher* Yes.
(Spelling ‘god’ is the least of my worries.)
- Andrew* G – O – D.
- Teacher* Yes, so that’s a bit different from the mouse story [The Wishing Well]. Does that matter?
- Andrew* I said G – O ...

I was really stuck. In hindsight, I can see that I could have elaborated on Leila’s idea to make it fit the resolution stage that we were working on. I could have suggested that Ryan say “Oh my god, I want a wish! How can I help the crystal so I get a wish?”. But I didn’t think that quickly. Instead, I questioned the validity of Leila’s idea because it was different from *The Wishing Well*. Different! I had somehow forgotten that I was trying to encourage the students to make *their own* choices as authors.

Serendipity

Sometimes our conversations came together, and we more easily understood each other.

- Teacher* When he put the crystal under the water, what would the crystal say then, when it was nice and cool?
- Justin* He say “Aah”.
- Teacher* Is the crystal going to say “Aah” like the mouse story?
- Students* No.
- Teacher* Or is the crystal going to say “Aah, that’s better”, or ...
- Jamie* No, he’s going to say “That feels much better. Aah.”
- Teacher* So the crystal would say ...
- Dylan* Or he can say like “Fank you for like ...”
- Jamie* “... saving me”.
- Teacher* Or he could say “Thank you for saving me”.
- Dylan* Yep, or he could say “Fank you for making me cold again”.
- Teacher* All of those things would be good ideas. We could say: “Aah, that feels better” or “Aah, thank you for cooling me down” or “Thank you for cooling me”.
- Justin* “Thank you for cooling me down.”

And so we reached a decision about how the crystal would respond to Ryan’s helpful act. We had listened to several suggestions — some from the students, some from me — and Justin had the last word. The students’ ideas and the conventions of narrative had (for a change) merged smoothly. In the process, the students were becoming conscious and knowledgeable agents in the world of the classroom, including the narratives we wrote.

How do particular students share in taking control of the text?

In negotiating a text with young writers, my aim is for each to participate as much as possible, with me and other students providing support until they are ready to take over. One day each will be able to write a narrative independently, but the shared group text is an important step on the way. Students’ participation in the construction of our class story, *The Wishing Crystal*, was not necessarily an indication of their capabilities. Participation is complex. It involves group dynamics, power, authority and confidence. However, my study of the transcript and videotape did provide me with interesting information about particular students.

Among the twelve students involved in the recorded session, I was able to respond easily to two. Their ways of thinking and talking were congruent with mine, and it was clear to me that they were more than ready to take on their roles as authors. It was one of these two, Dylan, who said: “You don’t have to say the same fink what you said ‘cause that’s in the mouse story and we would like to say somefing different instead of the same fink like the mouse story”. The other, Jamie, adamantly insisted that “Ryan’s not the crystal! I know what Ryan said.” He was very assertive in his role.

While others were also ready to take on their roles as authors, they presented a logic that I couldn’t gain access to so easily. Among these was Justin — an Aboriginal student with a strong dialect who was rarely heard in whole-class discussions. Justin was just beginning to make sense of print and basal readers. Nevertheless, he was very vocal and enthusiastic on occasions in this group. He often had an opinion about our choice of particular words. At times, though, I didn’t, or couldn’t, react to his offerings. Sometimes I didn’t know what to do with his suggestions. Perhaps the most difficult was when he came up with a response for the crystal to make to Ryan.

Justin He says: “Thank you for wishing me and all of my wishing stones”.

(He tries to attract my attention by talking more loudly.)

You could say: “Thank you for wishing ...”.
Ms Parkin, Ms Parkin.

(He is tapping me on the knee.)

Teacher Yes, Justin.

Justin You could say: “Thank you for wishing all of my stones might chuck up in the air”.

I really didn’t know what to say. I didn’t want to dampen his enthusiasm, but neither did I know what to do with his offering. We had decided on the character’s response minutes before he came up with this suggestion, and a student was already recording our sentence. I did respond with hopeful enthusiasm:

Teacher We could say that ...

But I didn’t know what to say next. Fortunately, Jamie stepped in to pass judgement.

Jamie But we’re not!

Neither Justin nor I made any response to that, and the moment passed.

That incident was one of several in which I ignored Justin’s contributions. In viewing the videotape of the lesson, I was surprised just how often his quiet voice was overlooked in our talk. Sometimes it was because I just didn’t hear it in the melee. Sometimes it was because I didn’t know how to respond. Could I have recorded his and others’ ideas for future reference, so that he understood that I didn’t want to dismiss his contributions?

Justin couldn’t decode very well at all, yet I was encouraged by his enthusiasm for the process of creating this story. He usually stayed down the front, and was engaged at various stages in ‘author talk’ and in helping to sound out words as other students recorded. His attention was usually on the text being written, even when it wasn’t his turn to write. The crystal’s sigh — “Aah” — seemed to take his fancy, and on the tape he could be heard on several occasions to be trying it out with different durations and tones of voice.

Other students participated in their own ways. Most joined in with gusto when asked to choose between two words, but didn’t make their own suggestions. All students took turns to record the sentences that had been decided. Unless the lesson stretched on for too long, they paid close attention to the text. Some were keen to read not only the part they had written, but the rest of the story, too.

What have I learned about negotiating texts with this group?

I’m always surprised by how much I pick up from studying transcripts, even from one lesson. Video records provide even more information about the work being done in class.

This study has given me further insights into my teaching practice, and into children’s worlds. I am reminded yet again how wasteful ‘recall’ is as a teaching strategy with young children. We spent a lot of time reviewing a previous lesson’s decisions and got tangled in communication difficulties that were probably avoidable. By forgetting to bring a copy of the writing plan, I missed a valuable chance to show how literacy can be used as a tool.

Some of the other communication difficulties just have to be weathered. Young students are still learning their language. It takes time, along with excellent listening, clarifying and negotiating skills, to interpret what they mean, and quick thinking to transform their offerings into something that is accessible to others.

There is still much to be explored. Since young students’ knowledge of ‘school business’ is so scant, I realise just how much our joint success depends upon me, and my ability to think and verbalise appropriately. When confronted with future communication hitches, I will now consider more consciously the following possible reasons, singly or in combination:

- The structure of the focus text is not clear.
- The focus and structure of the discussion is not clear.
- World knowledge is missing, and our meanings are different.
- Our meanings are the same but the student lacks the language to express the intended concept.

Creating negotiating space for young students is exciting, but like all new work requires constant reflection and reorientation in thinking. I don’t expect to ‘get it right’ all the time. But we’re on the way, this young group and I, and moving forward together.

References and sources

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About the author

Bronwyn Parkin has been involved in Aboriginal education for over 20 years. Her teacher research began as an Aboriginal Education teacher at a disadvantaged northern Adelaide school, which led to a Masters degree focusing on inclusive literacy curriculum. More recently she has been a research co-ordinator for the Commonwealth-funded 'Deadly Writin', 'Readin' and 'Talkin' Project, aimed at supporting the literacy learning of Aboriginal students. Bronwyn is currently the Middle Years (7-9) Project Officer at Aboriginal Education, Enfield, South Australia.