NOTES ON A WORKING HYPOTHESIS

In the following article, Professor James Britton builds on the findings of the Schools Council Research Project (Britton, Martin, Rosen, The Development of Writing Abilities, 11-18) which classified student writing according to three language function categories—expressive, transactional, poetic. Here he describes the evolution of these language functions, as a child develops oral and written abilities. He particularly emphasizes the often neglected uses of expressive language as a tool for learning.

For further reading, Britton's Language and Learning provides an introduction to his thinking about language. His two books are now available through NCTE. In addition, Writing and Learning Across the Curriculum, Martin, et al., available from Hayden Press, is an excellent companion to Britton's work, containing numerous examples of students' talk and writing in the three function categories.

The speech of children in their infancy has a "here and now" quality about it. They make comments, ask questions and make demands relating to the events going on around them and the people and objects involved in those events. Thereafter, a major dimension of their linguistic growth lies in their increasing ability to use language at further and further remove from the immediate context, the "here and now" in which they speak. This does not mean, of course, that they abandon one form of language in favour of another as they might abandon one pair of shoes when they need bigger ones. As adults we continue to rely on "context-bound" speech as the currency of our every-day exchanges with the people we meet. "Development" lies in a bifurcation, an ability to do two things with language where previously we could do only one.

Adding mastery of the written language to mastery of the spoken reflects one aspect of this development from context-bound to context-free utterance. A written communication—transmitted here and now for reception elsewhere, later—must of necessity be put into terms that can survive the transplantation. But again, this does not mean that all speech is context-bound and all writing context-free; simply that there will be an overall tendency in that direction.

Being context-bound (relying heavily for its interpretation upon the situation in which it is uttered) is one of characteristics of "expressive language" as a number of linguists have defined it. But it is only one part of that definition. In our Schools Council Writing Research Project we distinguished three major functions for writing and labelled them "Transactional," "Expressive," and "Poetic." We described the expressive as utterance that relies on an interest in the speaker (or writer) as well as in what he has to say about the world.

We called it an utterance that is "not projected very far from the speaker"—a communication between intimates rather than a public speech or a letter to a stranger. As such, it will tend to carry information about the speaker as well as convey his message about the world, revealing, for example, the speaker's attitude towards his message, towards his listener, and towards his own present state of mind. Expressive forms of speech capitalize on the fact that both speaker and listener are present; expressive writing simulates that co-presence, the writer invoking the presence of the reader as he writes, the reader invoking the presence of the writer as he reads.

Our experience of chatting with people we know well in a relaxed and loosely structured way is thus a major resource we draw upon when we

(Continued on page 9)
Notes On A Working Hypothesis (Continued from page 1)

write expressively. And whether we write or speak, expressive language is associated with a relationship of mutual trust, and is therefore a form of discourse that encourages us to take risks, to try out ideas we are not sure of, in a way we would not dare to do in, say, making a public speech. In other words, expressive language favors exploration, discovery, learning.

Transactional language is the medium for getting something done through language—whether it be asking or giving information, instructing or persuading. Poetic language, in its fully developed form, is the language of literature—stories, poems, plays. We saw it as language not for doing something, but for making something, a verbal object; and it seemed to us that the child who writes a fictional or autobiographical narrative, giving shape to real or imagined experiences, should be seen as performing at his untutored level essentially the same task as the novelist or poet

(Continued on page 10)
performs at a higher level.

It was the main purpose of our publication, *The Development of Writing Abilities, 11-18*, to describe those categories (among others). In additional we set up a developmental hypothesis that expressive writing should be regarded as a matrix from which the other two categories would develop. That is to say, expressive writing might be seen as a beginner’s all-purpose instrument; and “learning to write” would involve the progressive evolution both of the other two forms, transactional and poetic, and of the mature forms of expressive writing that we continue to use in personal letters and the like. We speculated that kinds of writing done at different stages might reveal “routes of development” in writing ability and that one route was likely to be more successful than others. The reasoning behind this speculation is simple enough, though a description of the stages begins to look complicated:

1. A great many children who cannot yet write are able to converse fluently in favorable conditions.
2. Those conditions include a relaxed situation, and a familiar and trusted audience, receptive to what they say.
3. In such situations, they will be fluent in expressive speech as we have defined it.
4. Expressive writing (as we have defined it) is the form of writing most nearly resembling expressive speech.
5. At the stage when they first try their hands at writing, most children have rich oral language resources, in terms of syntax and vocabulary. But if they are to become writers they must adapt these resources to the new demands of writing. The more the written forms resemble the spoken forms at their command, the easier the transition is likely to be.
6. Young writers who begin in employing an all-purpose expressive writing might, by a process of successive differentiation, arrive at different forms of discourse as they meet and solve the range of problems presented by different writing tasks. (The slogan, “learn to write by writing” must imply some such procedure.)
7. Stress must here be laid upon what the writer is reading, or having read to him; in other words on written “models.” Progress is likely to depend upon the degree to which he is internalising the forms of a variety of written discourse, and his ability, in the process of writing, to “shuttle” between these new resources and his consolidated spoken resources.

That brings us to first base, but an analysis of general learning (not just learning to write) is an essential part of our hypothesis. Thus:

8. A learner meeting a new concept needs to see its relevance to what he already knows. Since learners vary as to their prior experience and knowledge, they cannot be appropriately helped (by teachers or other learners) to make these links unless they have some opportunity to verbalize their experience and knowledge.

9. For these reasons, talk has a heuristic role to play, and expressive talk (talk in a relaxed context and relatively free from fear of making errors) is likely to be more strongly heuristic than, for example, the more formal exchange of teacher question and pupil answer with a whole class as audience.

But
(a) writing as premeditated utterance may have the effect of sharpening the connection-making process as well as harvesting the connections first explored in speech.

And
(b) writing puts the onus for effort on each member of the class.

Hence the hypothesis that expressive writing has an important role to play in the initial stages of grappling with new concepts.

10. If the writer begins to differentiate expressive writing from other kinds of discourse, according to the hypothesis, the learner will be acquiring mastery of informative writing at the same time he uses expressive writing to organize his understanding of the concepts he is writing about. This dual achievement should enable him increasingly to go through the exploratory stages of grappling with new ideas without committing those stages to writing. And at the same time the teacher may recognize less and less need to monitor or assist in exploratory stages, hence less and less call for expressive writing. This would be reflected in a distribution of function categories that showed (or tended to show, for there would be difficulties of interpretation) a transference of activity in writing from expressive forms to informative ones as learners become more mature.

This might be said to bring us to second base, though it is a minimal statement and many interesting ramifications could be added. To take one example:

11. Our characterisation of learning in (8) above is a pretty traditional and conservative one—that of the learner introduced to new concepts. We have talked to science teachers who believe that
one of their first tasks is to assist learners to distill facts from their own first-hand experience — as a necessary foundation for a learning career in which they must take many facts on trust from the reported experiences of other people. They therefore see a special virtue in expressive writing in that it tends to record in one and the same account both the experiences and the facts being drawn from them. By this means the teacher is allowed to perceive and assist the act of learning, of sorting experience from fact in order to select and organize the facts. It is not only at the earliest stages that "learning science" may involve an open-minded contemplation of some "bit of the world" (a plant, a soil sample, a crystal, or whatever). At every stage the learner must decide for himself what facts need to be formulated in order to solve a specific problem; then he may return for a more focused look at the object in the light of the facts so formulated. Expressive talk and writing are suitable modes for verbalizing the initial process, the open-ended contemplation. On the other hand, informative writing is a suitable mode for formulating the appropriate facts* or describing the solution to a problem. It will be obvious, I think, that the teacher's skill in selecting a sequence of problems to be solved should be directed to ensuring that the particular facts required for each solution build up to a coherent study of a scientific concept or principle, and beyond that to a coherent study of a particular branch of science.

In (8) and (11) above we have looked at the learning we associate with the movement from the expressive to the transactional function of writing. The development from expressive to poetic is associated, in our view, with a learning process of a different kind (perhaps one that is not often thought of as "learning"). Considering this movement brings us up to third base:

12. Most children who have had the opportunity like to listen to stories, read or told, and will frequently tell stories of their own making. (There is in fact some evidence that written stories constitute the only justification some children can accept for the existence of a written form of language.)

13. Most children who have the encouragement of an interested listener will narrate some of their own experiences.

14. Narrative versions of our own experience are compositions and as such subject to "embellishment;" fictional stories often display, however indirectly, aspects of the writer's own experience. Thus "autobiographical/fictional narrative" might be seen as continuum.

15. When we talk about our own experiences, I believe we usually do so in a way that suggests we want our listener to share the feelings we ourselves have about those experiences — to sympathise with us when we feel we were hardly done by, to admire when we are proud of our achievements, etc. This is consistent with the explanation D.W. Harding has given of gossip about actual events and fictional narratives, both of which he includes under the term "imaginary spectatorship." He suggests that they constitute "detached evaluative responses" to experience or to the possibilities of experience; and he associates our engagement in such activity with the maintenance of our value systems. In offering evaluations we are looking for corroboration, since to have our value systems "sanctioned" by fellow members of our society constitutes a "basic social satisfaction."

16. These purposes seem to us to differ in important ways from the purposes of informing, persuading, theorizing, etc., that are the typical activities of transactional discourse. We see them as requiring a quite different kind of discourse. The existence at the most developed end of this spectrum of a work of literature supplies a clue as to the nature of this alternative organization. We have described it as the "construction of a verbal object." The change from expressive narratives (gossip about events) to poetic narratives (verbal objects) is therefore seen as one of increasing organization-for-unity. "Organization" may include the ordered disposition of sounds, words, word meanings, sentences, events, feelings, thoughts, images.

17. The move from speech to writing in this spectrum — paralleling that described in (9) above — allows the shaping towards unity to be carried out in a premeditated way that is impossible in ordinary speech situations. (It is interesting to notice that speech may achieve poetic form when it occurs in a situation that is highly charged emotionally.)

18. While the fully developed written outcomes of work in History, Geography, Social Studies, Science will always be transactional forms of discourse, there are initial stages when writing in the expressive/poetic spectrum may be valuable to these disciplines from time to time. "Imagine you are a boy or girl in Roman Britain and describe your experiences." has been a familiar assignment in history lessons, and if some

(Continued on back page)
Notes On A Working Hypothesis (Continued from page 11)

teveloped geographical region or some social milieu be substituted for “Roman Britain,” a similar task will have appeared in a good many Geography and Social Studies lessons. The value of such tasks seems to be in encouraging students to empathize with the human elements in the topic under study, and while inaccurate or inadequate knowledge of the facts may disable the effort, the primary value does not lie in getting the facts right but in discovering what personal meanings can be derived from the factual framework. It is possible that even in science lessons this move towards the poetic could fulfill a purpose: commenting on the study of biology, Michael Polanyi has said, “Our understanding of living beings involves at all levels a measure of indwelling; our interest in life is always convivial.” (Polanyi, 1969, pp. 136-7)

19. A further item needs to be added to our analysis, and it brings us to fourth base—to home. It has been pointed out (Dixon, 1975) that the ease with which in expressive language we move from the transactional to the poetic, and back again, gives to that form of discourse a flexibility which serves the particular purposes of exploring and developing interpersonal relationships. Expressive writing for such purposes is not a transitional form existing only as precursor to other forms; rather it has a status of its own, and its development throughout the years of schooling will be to more sophisticated uses of expressive writing.

Since the publication of our report, a number of surveys have been carried out to determine patterns of school writing in each of our function categories, some in England, in Australia, Canada and the U.S.A. What they indicate is that expressive writing is very little encouraged in most schools, far too little for there to be any evidence regarding our hypothesis that such writing is the best starting point for writing in any of the function categories. We hold to our conviction that the quality of learning could be improved if fuller use were made of the heuristic potential of expressive writing. The alternative hypothesis to which teachers must apparently be working might be phrased as follows: “If you limp around long enough in somebody else’s language, you may eventually learn to walk in it.”

*Footnote. I owe acknowledgments here to an unpublished paper (1972) by Peter Medway of the Schools Council Development Project on Writing Across the Curriculum.

REFERENCES


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