"When I write songs, I gotta check it first," says Jameel, alluding to his reflective process when composing texts to be performed for his peers at "rug time" in Louise's K-1 classroom. Jameel is one of six focal children in Anne Dyson's latest case study research, which addresses the challenge some African American children and their teachers face in paving successful pathways to literacy. Jameel's "performances" at rug time are rooted in an aspect of African American folk tradition which Dyson highlights in her study: It is a tradition of language performance relying not only "on the lexical meaning of words, but on their expressive qualities, their inviting rhythms, [and] their vivid images" (p. 66). The goal of such a display is to have audience members caught up in the performance, thereby conferring control and prestige on the performer. This sociocultural tradition is often viewed as "oral," providing inadequate foundation for school literacy experiences, in comparison with the "literate" tradition of expository language use in the homes of "mainstream," middle class children entering school.

However, Dyson portrays a classroom in which the so-called "oral" tradition of language performance, far from being an impediment to the acquisition of literacy skills, becomes one of several productive vehicles that allows Jameel and many of his African American schoolmates to become fledgling writers. They craft their oral and written texts by drawing fluidly on the folk culture they share with African American peers, the popular, media-influenced culture they share with all their classmates, and the school's official literacy curriculum.

The six focal children attend a San Francisco Bay Area public school which draws its population from two distinct communities, their own African American, low-income/working class community and a predominantly European-American, middle-income/working class community. Over a two-year period, Dyson and her research assistants observed and audiotaped the African American focal children's interaction with peers and teachers during their daily composing time and during other classroom literacy events. The first year in the K-1 classroom of a European-American teacher here called Louise, Dyson focused on two kindergartners and two first graders. In the second year of the study, Dyson followed the
two first graders in their 1-2 classroom with a different teacher, and she also focused on a boy and girl from Louise’s new third grade classroom.

Dyson’s interpretive lens is based on Bakhtin’s vision of texts (oral and written) as embedded in social dialogue through which people position themselves “within a complex of human relationships” (p. 5). From this point of view, children’s learning to write involves “learning to participate in diverse social dialogues” (p. 152). Dyson sets out to look at how the focal children use oral and written language to accomplish “social work”: that is, how they construct, maintain, and manipulate their peer relationships through language, using tools that are familiar to them from their home community, such as stories, jokes, language plays, and songs.

In the K-1 case studies, Dyson documents the individuality of each child’s social agenda: Jameel, in his desire to establish control by performing for an audience, draws on stories, jokes and cartoons for performances which rely more on rhythm, rhyme and dialogue for their power to engage than on explicit, prosaic “sense.” Lamar, eager to establish social cohesion with peers, collaborates with two peers in reconstructing the story of a Batman movie they have seen; with each “Remember when?” and “Oh yeah, and then...,” they cue their shared knowledge and affirm a sense of a common bond. Consonant with Eugenie’s goal of establishing a sense of collegiality with peers are exchanges of compliments with girl friends and her talk with them about what “we” have to do in “our” work, particularly their spelling and illustrated stories.

As they discover the power of their language to accomplish “social work,” children such as Jameel craft stories that serve more than one social purpose. “With the same text, he [can] be a playful performer, collegial peer, a dutiful student and a tough teaser” (p. 144). Thus, through their composing efforts, children can over time expand their repertoire of participation with others in literacy events.

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Among the focal children in both Louise’s K-1 and third grade class, the social goal most consistently valued for writing is the performative one, to “elicit participation and energy of [the] audience” (p. 15), thereby gaining prestige and a measure of control over the audience.

This pleasure in performance might seem compatible with a practice considered central to writing process pedagogy, that of children as authors sharing their texts with their peers and asking for feedback to be used for improving their texts. However, Dyson points out that the social goal implicit in this pedagogical practice is not to perform for one’s peers, but is to communicate clear information. Similarly, the feedback often relates to missing information which can make the text clearer. Dyson, however, observed that when children performed their texts, they cast their peers and teachers in the role of “audience,” not “editor/helper.” They found it difficult to accept critical feedback because such critical reaction represented a loss of prestige and of control over their material.

Thus, the particular “social contexts” for literacy learning implicit in writing process pedagogy and its preference for the genre of expository writing seemed too narrow to accommodate the social purposes and cultural resources that the focal children brought to the task of learning to write. Dyson’s description of Louise’s efforts to resolve the conflict between “audience” and “teaching” roles and to bring Jameel and his peers to the point where they would be willing to consider their texts reflectively as drafts is a fascinating facet of this study.

Dyson observes that the children are most motivated to treat their texts as drafts when they realize they can deliberately improve the power of their performance. They reflect on feedback only if it is offered at a distance from the performing experience itself.
Children carefully craft their texts, trying, for instance, "to make words rhyme, phrases rhythmic, dialogue fast-paced, and images funny" (p. 149). Jameel tries out his singing text on himself first, to see if he is satisfied with the way it sounds.

Allowing children to embed their writing activity in their social lives does not necessarily mean that they are deflected from accomplishing the official aims of composing time. In Louise’s classes, the focal children’s most powerful and well-crafted texts, even using conventional criteria, seem to emerge when they have the freedom to write on themes that flow from their personal experience and deepest sociocultural roots to accomplish social purposes that are deeply satisfying to them.

Louise’s third grader, William, is an indifferent writer until he discovers his power to delight an audience of his peers with “true stories,” “exaggerated, humorous, and performative tale[s] that often revealed the cleverness of the teller.” He refers to these as the kind “my mom likes.” Writing about a teasing uncle and his pets in three long, interconnected stories, William carefully scripts the sequels to match the original story, The Cussing Bird, and engages in a range of official composing activities: planning, drafting, reflecting, and performing.

The sociocultural resources that the children draw upon from their home communities and what are usually termed “literate” resources made available to them in Louise’s “official” curriculum are not mutually exclusive. Dyson describes Louise herself as a wonderful storyteller. The rhyme and patterned repetitive language which are stylistic aspects of the children’s familiar ways with words are actually highly salient and delightful features of many of the storybooks she performs. The focal children, as yet unfettered by “conventional” notions of acceptable literacy genres, playfully bring together material as disparate as memorable life experiences, popular culture, folk tradition, science projects, linguistic readers, and story books to craft official texts in unanticipated genres, such as raps, popular songs, cartoons, and rhythmic verses.

The literacy curriculum which Louise enacts with the K-1 children is a “permeable” one; that is, it allows children to negotiate with the teacher what kinds of themes, genres, discourse structures, and social agendas for composing receive official recognition in the classroom. Moreover, the focal children are able to collaborate with peers of their choice with whom they have many levels of shared knowledge. When Louise gives children regular opportunities to perform their texts for each other, she increases children’s appreciation for different kinds of texts, and sometimes through those texts for each other as fellow composers.

Dyson captures moments in Louise’s classroom when “children and teachers are all wrapped up together inside a crafted tale, those moments when children see themselves as interconnected people in the classroom community” (p.213).

Louise always names the genres children introduce and helps them see the links between those genres and other “official” texts in the classroom. Thus, just as children are accustomed to reflect with Louise on the role of the “fox” character in different storybooks, they learn to reflect on similarities and differences between their own texts and others.

Dyson contrasts the experience Lamar and Eugenie have in Louise’s class with their experience the following year in the 1-2 class. In this class, the children are not able to collaborate with children of their own choice during composing time; nor do they have a forum for performing their texts. Moreover, writing tasks are organized with many more procedural steps to follow, based on decisions made by the teacher. These conditions seem to constrain the children from forging productive crossroads between their social agendas, cultural resources and official writing tasks.

For example, Eugenie on the sly confers with her friends on how
to fill eight prescribed story boxes about Abraham Lincoln's life. They decide to focus on his "behind the scenes" private life. Eugenie has no venue for the performance of her "marriage ceremony" dialogue. There is also no forum for comparing what aspects of Lincoln's life different children choose as significant, and for discussing how Eugenie's decisions might relate to such genres as historical fiction. Such opportunities might link her social agenda with the official school curriculum.

The unique contribution of this book is the documentation of the sociocultural intelligence of the focal African American children, as they integrate resources from their peer, folk, and official school worlds in unanticipated ways to produce meaningful texts. Dyson lends visibility and respectful weight to the children's perspective on what they want language to "do" for them. She believes that to the extent that classrooms represent "space that educators control" (p. 242), this portrait of the focal children's writing development offers a wider range of options to teachers for effectively supporting such minority children's efforts at composing.

Dyson's elaboration of some specific guidelines for teachers is a second major contribution of this book. The focal children lack engagement with expository and scientific writing genres, but despite that fact, they are willing to explain something to someone perceived as not being "in the know." For example, Jameel gives Dyson a very straightforward and complete exposition about an interesting bird: "This one is a dentist. ... This is a crocodile bird that cleans out the little stuff stuck up in his teeth. The crocodiles ... will never eat their dentist" (p. 126). Dyson encourages teachers to organize expository writing tasks in ways that make social sense to these young writers, i.e., that include an audience that "needs to know" what they are explaining.

One of the most pervasive metaphors Dyson uses in this book is one of crossroads connecting the intersecting landscapes of the children's peer world, home world, and official school world. She speaks of children drawing on the resources of their home and peer worlds to "nudge the official boundaries" of the conventional writing process curriculum. It would seem to this reviewer that Dyson's entire book represents a crossroads linking the situated literacy experiences of her case study children with the more abstract world of theories about children's literacy development. In forging this crossroads, Dyson has herself "nudged the boundaries" of the official universe of discourse about the literacy learning of minority children.