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Writing Together, Learning Together: Collaboration's Two-Way Street

As a researcher in Mary Ann Wessells's grade five classroom at the Stratham Memorial School in Stratham, New Hampshire, I made a point of reading and writing along with the children in order to become a part of the community I was studying. However, I didn't know that my community status would accidentally lead me into a child's writing as intimately as it did one day in late September.

Part of being a reader and writer in this class meant sharing that reading and writing. One day after I had shared a piece of my writing, one of the children, Stacy, came up and asked, "Would you work with me on a story?"

I didn't have a particular agenda for complying, beyond a general conviction that I should follow the children's leads. I just said it sounded like fun, and we began immediately. Stacy sat down beside me and set several pieces of paper and a pen on the table in front of us.

First, Stacy asked me what kind of a story I wanted to write. Typically, this is the very sort of question a researcher might turn back on a child, but I had been asked to collaborate. In order for this endeavor to be authentic, I would have to be an equal partner in the writing, with equal investment in the task. I told Stacy it might be fun to work on a Halloween story to share at the end of the following month.

"That sounds good," Stacy agreed.

"Who do you think we should write this for?" I asked.

"Little kids," was Stacy's immediate response.

"OK," I said and made a note of our audience at the top of the page in front of us. Next, I asked what kind of characters we ought to include. Stacy quickly spilled off, "Ghosts, witches, goblins, talking Jack o' Lanterns and a big huge talking black cat."

I listed these characters next. As I wrote, I realized that I was demonstrating for Stacy some of my own writing strategies of which I had been only marginally aware. I began to wonder what would happen to Stacy's writing if, as we wrote, I continued to make my process visible to her.

"Should the story happen to these characters," I asked, "or are they a part of something that happens to someone else?"

Stacy went right along with me. "It should happen to kids, a girl and a boy."

"Let's give them names," I suggested.

"The girl should be Jillian," Stacy quickly decided. "I baby-sit a girl named Jillian."

"OK, Jillian for the girl. I'll call the boy Jack. Jack and Jillian." I wrote the names next to the list of the other characters Stacy had suggested.

"They're twins!" Stacy exclaimed.

"Good idea!" I wrote "twins" next to Jack and Jillian's names. "What do you think we should do next?"

Without hesitation, Stacy responded, "Find a main idea."

"OK," I said, somewhat surprised. "Do you have any ideas?"

"They go out on Halloween night and meet real mean witches and a talking Jack o' Lantern warns them, but they don't believe him. The witches lock them in a dark
closet or basement with ghosts and goblins or in the basement with a talking cat."

I wrote down these suggestions and we sat mulling them for several minutes. One problem I had seen in children's writing was an abundance of interesting, but often unrelated, plot elements and characters. Attempting to find a link between Stacy's ideas, I suggested, "Maybe the talking cat could be a child that the witches have turned into a cat, a child who didn't listen to warnings."

"Good idea," Stacy told me. At this point, we decided that we probably had enough ideas to start writing. Stacy suggested that the opening scene ought to be "at a cemetery with witches stirring a brew." We tried this and soon reached a dead end. I was now torn by my dual role of collaborator/mentor. Even though Stacy's impulse to begin with the mood was quite sophisticated, I knew it would be much easier for her to follow a logical train of thought if she began with her main characters. Should I wait for Stacy, make a suggestion or take the story over? I opted for waiting. After a few minutes, Stacy said, "This isn't going to work."

"What kind of costumes do you think Jack and Jillian should be wearing?" Stacy went on. "Maybe Jack could be the Scarecrow from Wizard of Oz?"

"Then Jillian could be Dorothy," I suggested. We decided there should be some friction between the twins and Stacy suggested that they might be teasing each other about their costumes, "We could say like Jack and Jillian were walking down the road with their Trick or Treat bags and Jack was telling Jillian how dumb she looks." I knew that Stacy was capable of more than simple description of the opening action. This was a place to demonstrate a more advanced technique: revealing plot, character, and setting through dialogue.

"How do you think they sound?" I asked. As Stacy responded, I began writing dialogue without any introductory description, transcribing part from Stacy's dictation, interspersing my own ideas, and stopping occasionally to read back what we'd written so far. In the following passage, the words in italics are Stacy's contributions:

"Jillian, you look really dumb," Jack said, "you don't even look like you're wearing a costume. You look just like a dumb girl."

"Well, for your information, I'm Dorothy Gale from Kansas. You look just like a stupid scarecrow... you don't need a costume. You don't have a brain either!"

"You stupid... hey — look at that graveyard! Let's explore it!"

"You really don't have a brain!"

"Chicken!"

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

"No, I'm not."

"Prove it."

Jillian looked around. The sky was dark and the wind made a shiver run down her spine. The last thing she wanted to do was go into a spooky graveyard.

I showed Stacy what I had written. "Neat," she said, and dictated the next line.

"People said it was haunted and right now she believed it."

"Cluck, cluck, cluck," teased Jack.

"Why you!" screamed Jillian, as she whacked him on the head with her trick or treat bag. There were times when she hated her twin brother Jack and this was one of them.

After Stacy had read this last portion, she said, "This is a good way to put the information in. I don't like to put all the information at the start because it's boring, but sometimes I don't know what else to do. I'll remember this." Then she began dictating again.

"Chicken? I'll show you who's chicken!" And she ran up the hill to the graveyard. At the top of the hill she stopped short. Out of nowhere appeared a pumpkin with bright eyes. Jillian screamed! Just then, Jack ran up.

"Where did that pumpkin come from? He wasn't there a minute ago."

"I have no idea," Jillian was really spooked and Jack was staring wide-eyed.
The pumpkin smiled a crooked smile and said, "Good eeeevening. Don't go in there kiddies!"

"And why not?" Jack demanded.

"Because there's witches and spooks and goblins because it's HALLOWEEEEEEN!"

"Maybe we'd better not go in there," Jillian whispered.

"Are you scared? I bet it's just someone playing a trick on us!" And he grabbed Jillian's arm and pulled her through the gate.

The pumpkin laughed and disappeared.

"I'm scared," Jillian hissed.

"You're just chicken," Jack sneered.

Our first writing session ended with the lunch bell. Before I left the classroom that day, I checked Stacy's cumulative writing portfolio, and xeroxed her last sample from the previous year to look over that night. I had made a point of talking through the punctuation as I wrote. At the point I turned the pen over to Stacy, she had continued to punctuate the dialogue correctly. According to the prior year's writing sample, Stacy had used dialogue but had not punctuated it appropriately.

Correct punctuation of dialogue was, apparently, a new skill. Wondering whether today's session had contributed, I made a note to ask Stacy about it next time we met. It also seemed that Stacy was now much more proficient in using dialogue to reveal character than before.

I read through our story again. It seemed that Stacy had turned the story over to me when the plot needed to be advanced. Her comments revealed that she noticed how I was working in new information. I wondered if she would try some of my strategies for incorporating details to move the story forward.

When I saw Stacy again, I pointed out the differences between her current writing and that of the previous year, especially in punctuation. She said, "Mrs. Herdecker [Stacy's fourth grade teacher] told us about that all the time last year. I kept remembering it when we were writing this."

"Did it help to watch me?" I asked.

"I guess it did. I could say the words, but it was neat to see them come on the page all punctuated. And I like how you'd say sometimes like 'Jillian whispered' or 'Jack sneered.' That's a lot better than 'said, said, said' all the time."

Indicating a prior year's sample, I asked, "Can you tell me anything about this piece of writing?"

"Well, it's not as good as this."

"What makes you say that?"

"It's just boring. What we wrote sounds more like a book. During reading yesterday I noticed in my book some things like in our story. You [the reader] feel more excited."

"What did you notice in your book?"

"Well, the words are better," she told me, "like in our story compared to this [last year's piece]. Or the people in it are more real. In this nobody would know anything about them ... But in books the way the author does it shows more the way the characters are."

That day's writing session, however, was not as successful as our first attempt had been. The end of our last entry showed that Jack had just sneered, so I followed with action consistent with his character. I changed the period after Jack's name to a comma and continued as follows:

... Jack sneered, as he grabbed her Trick or Treat bag filled with Snickers bars and ran into the spooky old graveyard.

"Jack, you get back here with my Trick or Treat bag or I'm going to tell Mom!" But Jack didn't hear her — he was too far ahead.

"I don't really want to go in there," Jillian thought, "but if I don't, he'll eat all my Snickers bars."

Although Stacy contributed to the day's efforts, she did so with less enthusiasm than before. When one of her friends wanted to confer about another piece of writing, Stacy told me to feel free to go ahead without her. She joined her friend's group, leaving me to wonder if I wasn't more invested in the story than she. I put the writing away.

I was pleased, therefore, when I returned to the classroom several days later. Stacy skipped up to me and
said, “I had some ideas so I kept writing.” Opening her
folder, she showed me the following addition:

“And I really love snickers bars.”

Jillian ran up the hill and into the graveyard and
started to yell.

“Jack come back here! Jack where are you. Jack
please answer me!”

“Rraaaaaa!” yelled Jack.

“Why you!” screamed Jillian.

“See you are a chicken!”

“No I’m not!” she stopped in mid sentence.

“What’s the matter?” asked Jack.

“Shh! Look!” whispered Jillian.

“What is it?” asked Jack. As he turned around he
saw 3 witch’s stirring something in a big black pot.

“That’s really good,” I told Stacy. It was true. Stacy had
used a variety of words instead of “said,” had moved
the action forward, and had continued with her correct
punctuation. She obviously didn’t need me anymore.

“I like it,” Stacy told me. “I’m going to work on it some
more, but not today.” She paused for a moment, then
added, “I thought it would be fun if we both wrote
different endings and then we could compare them.”

“That’s fine,” I said. “That really might be interesting.”
Now that she had the story going she obviously felt we
needed to follow our own instincts as writers.

L. S. Vygotsky (1978) argued that teachers could opti-
mize their own knowledge and that of their students by
working within what he termed the Zone of Proximal
Development, that area between what a student is
capable of independently and what they can do with
the help of a more skilled individual. However, it too
often seems that applications of Vygotsky’s theory
reflect the belief that classroom learning is one-sided.
The teacher leads; the student follows. This collabora-
tion created a very concrete Zone of Proximal Develop-
ment, but not just for Stacy. Certainly, I demonstrated
and supported strategies and skills in a piece of writing
that was important to both of us. Within this context,
Stacy integrated knowledge both during our shared
writing sessions and on her own. In this way, however,

Stacy taught me to see where and (for how long) she
needed my help. She helped me to see not only her
writing process, but my own as well.

This collaboration came about, in part, because of the
educational context in Mary Ann Wessells’s classroom.
She encouraged the children to connect old knowledge
with new, and to use their community as a resource to
support their literate endeavors. Stacy felt comfortable
to approach a fellow writer and propose the collabora-
tion. And in that collaboration, I was able to teach in a
way I never had before, and learn as well.

Eventually, Stacy and I each finished our own version
of the story. After we had shared with each other, Stacy
said, “They’re both real good. Let’s put them together
in one story again.” Later, when we shared our com-
bined story with the whole class we sat side by side and
took turns reading. Afterwards, Nancy came up to
Stacy and said, “That was really good. Would you
 collaborate with me next?”

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