

1993

## Nurturing and assessing children's emerging writing abilities

D. Janeece Lasley

*Let us know how access to this document benefits you*

Copyright ©1993 D. Janeece Lasley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Lasley, D. Janeece, "Nurturing and assessing children's emerging writing abilities" (1993). *Graduate Research Papers*. 2768.

<https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/2768>

This Open Access Graduate Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Papers by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uni.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uni.edu).

**Offensive Materials Statement:** Materials located in UNI ScholarWorks come from a broad range of sources and time periods. Some of these materials may contain offensive stereotypes, ideas, visuals, or language.

---

## Nurturing and assessing children's emerging writing abilities

### Abstract

In the past twenty years, writing instructional programs have moved away from an emphasis on form. Currently, the focus is on creating meaning through the composition process. Underlying the emphasis on form was the assumption that if students had all the necessary subskills for writing, they could synthesize them into quality composition (Hieronymous & Hoover, 1987). The recent trend is to center on the whole of the idea, not to accumulate discrete skills. This approach to writing encourages students to take risks, to construct their own meaning, and to learn to integrate prior knowledge with the demands of the writing tasks (De Fina, Anstendig, & De Lawter, 1991).

Nurturing and Assessing  
Children's Emerging Writing Abilities

A Graduate Project  
Submitted to the  
Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by  
D. Janece Lasley  
May 1993

This Research Paper by: D. Janece Lasley

Entitled: Nurturing and Assessing Children's Emerging Writing  
Abilities

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for  
the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

6/25/93  
Date Approved

Jeanne McLain Harms  
~~Director of Research Paper~~  
Director of Research Paper

6/25/93  
Date Approved

Jeanne McLain Harms  
~~Graduate Faculty Adviser~~  
Graduate Faculty Adviser

7/9/93  
Date Approved

Constance J. Ulmer  
~~Graduate Faculty Reader~~  
Graduate Faculty Reader

7/8/93  
Date Approved

Peggy Ishler  
~~Head, Department of Curriculum and Instruction~~  
Head, Department of Curriculum  
and Instruction

In the past twenty years, writing instructional programs have moved away from an emphasis on form. Currently, the focus is on creating meaning through the composition process. Underlying the emphasis on form was the assumption that if students had all the necessary subskills for writing, they could synthesize them into quality composition (Hieronymous & Hoover, 1987). The recent trend is to center on the whole of the idea, not to accumulate discrete skills. This approach to writing encourages students to take risks, to construct their own meaning, and to learn to integrate prior knowledge with the demands of the writing tasks (De Fina, Anstendig, & De Lawter, 1991).

In light of this instructional change, the assessment of students' growth in writing needs to be examined. Assessment methods used in the past were not designed to measure students' growth through involvement in the processes of language. A mismatch occurs when quantitative measures of language fragments are used to assess students' growth in a writing instructional program that emphasizes process. Qualitative means of assessment need to be used to describe students' emerging writing abilities. For this reason, professional educators have begun to develop more compatible alternative assessment methods.

In describing students' growth in writing, the most trustworthy assessment is usually conducted by the classroom

teacher as part of the teaching process (Lloyd-Jones & Lunsford, 1989). Thus, assessment becomes authentic when students' performance is directly examined on worthy intellectual tasks (Wiggins, 1990). A means of conducting authentic assessment is through portfolios--collections of individual students' writing over a period of time (Valencia, 1990).

#### Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to review current professional literature on nurturing children's writing abilities and assessing this growth, specifically through portfolios.

#### Writing as a Language Process

In order to develop an appropriate assessment of writing ability, it is necessary to examine how one views language learning. Cambourne (1988) defines writing as a form of language behavior that involves both construction and comprehension of text. When writers read their own writing, they not only communicate meaning to themselves, but they discover how to order their thinking and the language that reflects that thinking. Cambourne (1988) relates that as the writing process is engaged in, writers encounter the interconnections of language and its forms as they strive to make meaning of their experiences. It is difficult to separate writing and reading, because as writers are composing, they frequently stop to read what they have created

and then resume writing. Murray (1979) relates that writers think to write and write to think.

Traditional assessment through formal tests focuses on the end product and does not describe writers' behavior in the composition process (Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991; Winograd, Paris, & Bridge, 1991). To describe writers' growth and instructional needs, their behavior within the writing process needs to be observed, for language is learned through involvement in the functions of language. Within whole units of language, children's risk-taking can be noted as they generate and test hypotheses about language and its interrelated systems (Cambourne, 1988). An appreciation for imperfections is a result of this process as emerging writers explore the conventions of language (Goodman, 1986).

Assessment exercises that chop language into bits and pieces as though they are part of a hierarchy do not reflect the nature of language and how it is learned. As children engage in the aspects of the writing process which are recursive, they choose a topic, often drawing from their background of experiences; engage in drafting the work; and then may choose to redraft the work to clarify and extend its meaning, to revise the form of the work, and to publish the product.

Students' ownership of the writing process and their attention to developing their own voice throughout this process

are of primary concern. Time to think, reflect, and revise is essential as learners grow toward meta-textual awareness (Cambourne, 1988). From this purposeful experience, writing abilities are nurtured. Therefore, assessment of this growth will necessitate an ongoing observation and documentation of the learners' behavior within the composition process. Neither multiple-choice tests nor writing samples performed under time constraints can provide evidence of growth in the recursive nature of the writing process (Graves, 1983).

#### Creating a Writing Environment

In order to observe and assess growth in the writing process, teachers must provide an environment in which children can write and therefore develop writing abilities (Smith, 1982). As Graves (1983) suggests, the classroom writing workshop must be a combination studio and laboratory where students can take risks comfortably in a secure and predictable atmosphere. Student responsibility increases as children select their own topics, what to say about them, and how much attention to give to the conventions of language. Classrooms must be print-rich, immersing learners in reading and writing experiences that offer quality literature as models. The importance of blocks of uninterrupted time is also recognized as essential to a reading/writing environment.



The writing workshop, a small group of peers interacting with themselves and with the teacher, can provide much response to each other's writing. In this interactive community, children learn to risk sharing themselves through their writing, as well as to accept the suggestions and ideas of others. Writers pose questions and investigate possible solutions as they accept ownership in problem solving (Graves, 1983).

With this focus on writing instruction, the role of the teacher changes. The teacher acts as a facilitator, collaborating with the students as they engage in the learning process. In the studio/laboratory atmosphere, the teacher takes on a role somewhat like an artist in residence. The teacher must model the process alongside the emerging writers, letting them see his/her struggle with the aspects of the writing process, such as topic selection or revision. Thus, the teacher becomes part of the writing community (Graves, 1983). As the teacher models questioning and responding through conferencing, he/she teaches young writers to conference independently with each other, further enhancing ownership of the learning process.

As a facilitator the teacher's primary task is to listen, not only as a sounding board for a writer needing response, but for those opportunities in which guiding questions can be posed that will lead learners toward relevant connections (Graves, 1983; Murray, 1979). Much of his/her time is spent watching

learners and recording observations of student behaviors and teacher collaboration, for this information is of value when periodic assessment of student growth is conducted.

Calkins (1986) stresses that teachers need to help students see themselves as authors, as well as see the authors behind their reading. Being knowledgeable of authors of quality literature and their works assists children, not only in learning about the different vehicles by which meaning can be created, but in discovering their voices.

#### Assessment Clarified

When schools engage in the process of instructional development, the goals of the school program are examined. This scrutiny may lead to change or modification and then to clarification and restatement (Winograd et al., 1991). In schools today, much of the instructional development activity is concerned with the infusion of the whole language concept into the program which necessitates the consideration of alternatives to traditional assessment. Whole language as an instructional concept focuses on children creating meaning through the language processes (Cambourne, 1988; Goodman, 1986).

Evaluation becomes ongoing as students and teachers collaborate throughout the year (Goodman, 1989). Portfolios provide a system of collecting exhibits and documentation of growth. They can provide exhibits representative of a broad

range of performances and behaviors within the language processes. Multiple measures of assessment can be applied to these samples, thus supplying data for several audiences-- students, teachers, parents, administrators, or the political community (Winograd et al., 1991).

In the past traditional assessments, such as standardized tests, have been easily misinterpreted and misused in isolation. The public has been led to believe these tests reveal student achievement in writing and language learning (Lloyd-Jones & Lunsford, 1989). Portfolios, on the other hand, can include standardized test results simply as one indicator of performance in conjunction with several means of assessing children's writing in a holistic experience (Valencia, Pearson, Peters, & Wixson, 1989).

Variations of portfolios are as numerous as the teachers implementing their use in writing programs. Regardless of the measures included, interpretation of assessment needs to reflect the goals of the writing program and to enhance students' literacy.

#### Portfolios as Means of Qualitative Assessment

The reciprocal relationship of assessment and instruction is essential to classroom-based assessment. Assessment information is collected through many types of classroom instructional encounters, involving students and teachers in a

collaborative process (Tierney et al., 1991). Then data collection is a documentation of (a) student attitudes, (b) behaviors, (c) achievements, (d) improvements, (e) thinking, and (f) reflective self-evaluation. In the collection of this data, the teacher can select a combination of questionnaires, surveys, anecdotal records, observational journals, miscue analyses, conferences, interviews, student journals, checklists, tally sheets, files, portfolios, albums, audio and videotapes.

Tierney et al., (1991) believe that portfolios facilitate classroom-based assessment of students' writing progress. A writing portfolio is a collection of a child's composition that can be viewed, and assessed periodically. These exhibits can be passed from grade to grade in whole or part. A portfolio can be used to make instructional decisions and reports to parents. Lloyd-Jones and Lunsford (1989) propose a portfolio model that includes (a) teacher observations, (b) reading records, (c) writing samples, (d) art samples, (e) varied responses to literature, and (f) other pertinent work. Parent input can also be included in the students' portfolios. Most teachers view the portfolio as an ever-changing tool for assessment that can be revised as their understanding of this process develops.

Portfolios have "intuitive appeal" (Valencia, 1990, p. 338). They can capture and capitalize on the best a student has to offer. They can encourage the use of different ways to

evaluate and have the integrity and validity that is not offered by other assessments. In her advocacy of the use of portfolios, Valencia (1990) states four theoretical guiding principles:

1. Authenticity: Authentic language instruction is documented to assess the orchestration, integration, and application of composition abilities in meaningful contexts.

2. Ongoing: Evaluation is on-going as it chronicles a student's development throughout the year.

3. Multidimensional: Portfolios sample a wide range of cognitive processes, affective responses, and literary activities.

4. Collaborative: Collaboration between the teacher and student occurs in determining what samples will go in the portfolio, as well as the collaborative learning which precedes it.

These guiding principles are in direct contrast with the characteristics of formal testing that have dominated assessment programs in the past. Formal tests reflect an outdated view of classrooms and restrict goals for learning as they are anxiety-producing and uni-dimensional and often isolate skills from the whole (Tierney et al., 1991).

Valencia (1990) also suggests that portfolios should be easily accessible by both the students and the teacher. She suggests an expandable file folder for each child.

Most advocates of using portfolios advise teachers against trying to do too much too soon when beginning to implement portfolios. When Au (1990) first established her use of portfolios, she anchored the assessment potential to benchmarks that reflect expectations for the hypothetical average student. She used (a) the state language arts guide, (b) the standardized test used in their district, and (c) the scope and sequence of the language arts program. The assessment tasks within the folder included (a) a questionnaire on attitudes toward reading and writing, (b) a response to literature task, (c) a sample of the student's writing, (d) a running record, and (e) a voluntary reading log. A profile sheet was used to summarize the contents and findings within the portfolio.

The profile sheet, or summary sheet, provides an organizing framework to synthesize information in a way that helps teachers make decisions and communicate with parents and administrators. Principals and superintendents are frequently interested in this type of information, but parents will be more interested in the raw data and examples contained in the portfolio (Valencia, 1990).

Variations of the portfolio are numerous. Fehring (1988) suggests the use of a process-writing computer diskette for each student as part of his/her literacy profile.

Portfolio use is not without its criticism and concerns. Critics mention unreliability, inconsistency, and inequity across classrooms, schools, and districts. Valencia (1990) counters with these suggestions: (a) discuss goals and priorities for instruction and assessment as a district, (b) collect ongoing indicators of goal achievement, and (c) include required evidence and supporting evidence for every child at each grade level.

#### Other Qualitative Assessment Techniques

In a writing workshop, the portfolio becomes a showcase for the development that occurs through writing in progress. The writing folder, a working folder for drafts in their various stages, can be the source of exhibits for the portfolio (Tierney et al., 1991).

Calkins (1990) promotes the use of notebooks as a predraft device to record those "bits of our lives and our thinking" which we do not wish to forget (p. 38). Entries can take the form of notes, lists, drafts, observations, or ramblings on many different topics. Reading and rereading one's notebook often helps writers to see patterns or connections in what was considered personally meaningful at the time, and then drafts can generate from these collections. Notebooks, folders, and portfolios are all organizational tools for writing.

Tied very closely to the use of portfolios is the practice of conferencing with writers throughout the process of writing.

The conference notes can become a part of the portfolio collection. Conferences can be held with a teacher, a peer, a group of peers with or without a teacher, a parent, or even with oneself. The teacher needs to model conferencing several times prior to setting up peer conferences. The teacher can even suggest broad questions that can be asked among the writers in the group to foster attention to the task (Graves, 1983).

Most student revisions occur during or after conferencing with the teacher or with peers (Calkins, 1983; Graves, 1983). The teacher's questioning of writers needs to foster their thinking processes. As children think through a piece of writing, they make decisions as to what to add or change. Graves (1983) reminds us that the force or energy for revision is rooted in children's voices, or their urge to express their ideas and feelings. Therefore, the purpose of conferences is to keep them in touch with the energy source for writing.

In the process of conferencing, students progress toward what Cambourne (1988) refers to as "metatextual awareness" (p. 197). Writers develop a conscious awareness of how to write, how to deal with writing problems, and how to learn. Effective writers can discuss such aspects as leads and endings, the power of details, ways to draft and edit, and the conventions important to a final draft. Documenting what occurs during conferencing, and then redrafting, revising, and perhaps eventual publishing,



will provide the teacher with authentic evidence of growth in the writing process.

### Conclusions

The language arts instructional program should include assessment by the learners themselves, thus integrating teaching, learning, and assessment. The process of conferencing about writing in conjunction with maintaining writing folders and portfolios promotes responsibility for students' own learning.

Student self-assessment is the major goal of developing writing portfolios. Even though the teacher can assist students in selecting representative pieces for the portfolio, students must view the portfolio as their collection that exhibits their writing progress. Thus, students should take the major responsibility for selecting what goes in the portfolio, how it will be shared, and how it will be evaluated. This student-centeredness means a focus on the writing process and not the product. Assessment becomes noncompetitive as students are compared to themselves and not to their peers. Portfolios become customized to the learning experiences and needs of each individual student, therefore taking on a variety of appearances. As portfolios are compiled and revisited, students can engage in a great deal of decision-making about what they value, what they have accomplished, and how they have grown as writers.

## References

- Au, K. H. (1990). Assessment and accountability in a whole literacy curriculum. The Reading Teacher, 43, 574-578.
- Calkins, L. M. (1983). Lessons from a child: On the teaching and learning of writing. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Calkins, L. M. (1986). The art of teaching writing. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Calkins, L. M. (1990). Living between the lines. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Cambourne, B. (1988). The whole story: Natural learning and the acquisition of literacy in the classroom. Auckland, NZ: Ashton Scholastic.
- De Fina, A. A., Anstendig, L. L., & De Lawter, K. (1991). Alternative integrated reading/writing assessment and curriculum design. Journal of Reading, 34, 354-359.
- Fehring, H. (1988). Language assessment: Developing a literacy profile. Reading Around Series No. 2 (Report No. ISBN-0-949512-20-6). Adelaide, Australia: Australian Reading Association. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 300 792)
- Goodman, K. (1986). What's whole in whole language? Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

- Goodman, K. S. (1989). Preface. In K. S. Goodman, Y. M. Goodman, & W. J. Hood (Eds.), The whole language evaluation book (pp. xi-xv). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Graves, D. H. (1983). Writing: Teachers & children at work. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Hieronymous, A. N., & Hoover, H. D. (1987). Handbook for focused holistic scoring: Writing. (ITBS Supplement to Form G, H, or J). Chicago, IL: Riverside Publishing Co.
- Lloyd-Jones, R., & Lunsford, A. A. (1989). The English coalition conference: Democracy through language. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Murray, D. (1979). The listening eye: Reflections on the writing conference. College English, 41, 157-163.
- Smith, F. S. (1982). Writing and the writer. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Tierney, R. J., Carter, M. A., & Desai, L. E. (1991). Portfolio assessment in the reading-writing classroom. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers, Inc.
- Valencia, S. W. (1990). A portfolio approach to classroom reading assessment: The whys, whats, and hows. The Reading Teacher, 44, 338-340.
- Valencia, S. W., Pearson, P. D., Peters, C. W., & Wixson, K. K. (1989). Theory and practice in statewide reading assessment: Closing the gap. Educational Leadership, 46, 57-63.

Wiggins, G. (1990). The case for authentic assessment (Contract No. R-88-062003). Washington, DC: ERIC Clearinghouse on Tests, Measurement, and Evaluation.

Winograd, P., Paris, S., & Bridge, C. (1991). Improving the assessment of literacy. The Reading Teacher, 45, 108-115.