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Abstract

This article describes one school's approach to establishing a Book Club where children learn to 'read like writers'. It offers insights into the practicalities of the project and its successes.

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Berry School Book Club: Engaging readers *and* writers

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with support from

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ABSTRACT

This article describes one school's approach to establishing a Book Club where children learn to 'read like writers'. It offers insights into the practicalities of the project and its successes.

Background

Many years back Andrea Butler and I decided to write a book. The book, *Towards a reading writing classroom*, was published by the Primary English Teaching Association (PETA) in 1984. It was, much to our surprise, a great success, selling over 35,000 copies in Australia and the US and UK. At the time, Andrea and I were literacy consultants working in government schools. Working alongside teachers as they implemented 'process writing', we observed that children's writing often mirrored or reflected in some way what they had read, were reading or what was being read to them. We were excited by these interesting moments and wanted to share what we saw. There were several writers at the time who greatly influenced us: Brian Cambourne and his 'conditions of learning' (indeed the first chapter in the book), Donald Graves and his focus on young children learning to write, Donald Murray and his focus on the process of teaching writing, Rob Tierney, David Pearson, Lucy Calkins and many others.

However, it was one particular article in *Language Arts* that really grabbed our attention – Frank Smith's (1983) *Reading like a writer*. Smith's writings convinced us that that our anecdotal observations were more than just 'interesting moments'; they were a result of young writers engaging in the texts they read in particular ways.

What the literature tells us

Since 1984, there have been many who have researched and written about the important links between reading and writing, taking up Smith's (1983) notion of the importance of 'reading like a writer'. Abadiano and Turner (2002) argue that there is now 'substantial evidence to suggest that a 'mentor relationship' can develop between authors and children' (p. 1). Certainly Corden's (2007) extensive research in the UK supports this claim. Corden's study was conducted with 18 teachers across nine elementary schools. The research question – Can children's writing be enhanced by teachers drawing attention to the literary devices used by professional authors or 'mentor authors'? – revealed that a 'critical evaluation of literature and an examination of literary devices can help children become more reflective writers' (p. 12).

More recently, Griffith (2010) carried out an ethnographic study, observing a Grade 4 teacher as she helped her students 'read like writers' (p. 49). The teacher employed a 'gradual release of responsibility model' as she planned explicit activities that would engage her students in 'well-crafted' writing (p. 49). Guided by Smith's (1983) words, that 'it can

only be through reading that writers learn all the intangibles that they know' (p. 558), the research focused on 'What role does the teacher play in helping students learning to read like writers?' (p. 50). Several critical conditions emerged from Griffith's study. These included that this Grade 4 teacher:

- was a writer, having been a journalist before moving into teaching. She understood the process and nature of writing and perceived herself to be writer;
- was able to identify the 'writer's craft' and draw this to the attention of her students;
- modelled how to use 'craft writing' for her students;
- gave students opportunities to 'try' the writing technique discussed and demonstrated in their own writing.

A strong message for all of us that emerged from Griffith's (2010) research is that:

Teachers who engage in the practice of reading like a writer themselves are better able to help students read like writers. These teachers notice well-crafted writing while reading for pleasure, while reading the writing of their students and while reading aloud to the students in their class. (p. 63)

Another body of research has focused on the use of book clubs to engage students in deep or close reading of quality literature. For example, Mayo (2000) focused on a form of book club known as 'genre study' (p. 74). While studying a particular book, Mayo aimed at moving the class from a 'surface reading of the text to reading on a deeper level' (p. 75). Mayo states that she assumed this would happen automatically; however, she found she had to teach her students 'how to do closer readings' (p. 74). She did so by encouraging her students 'to look at the writer's craft' (p. 74). The final step Mayo highlights was to ask her students to try a similar type of writing of their own.

Much of the research into the use of book clubs in the classroom, however, focuses on the nature of reflection, meaning-making, close reading and the nature of conversations about the book(s) being read (Barone, 2013; Frank, Dixon & Brandts, 2001). The challenge we set for ourselves was: Could we use the structure of book clubs to not only focus on reading deeply but to also develop writers by teaching them how to 'read like writers'?

The Berry Public School Book Club in action

Getting started

After all these years I am certainly convinced that 'reading like a writer' is a concept that will engage our children as writers. I can 'tell' teachers about the concept. I can share the research with them. I can share examples of children's writing. I can even demonstrate what I mean with a group of children. But then I struggle with responding to the questions the teachers ask, such as:

- What skills and knowledge do I need in order to 'teach' students to 'read like a writer'?
- How do I choose the 'literary devices', language of the text, to bring to the attention of the children when modeling for teachers?
- How do I know how to phrase my questions to the children in order to get them exploring the text closely, in order to have them 'read like writers'?
- And many more ...

The questions that have stayed with me therefore are: How *do* we teach children to read like writers? Or more specifically how *do I* teach children to read like writers? Since I have not

had a class of children for many years, it has been difficult to resolve my dilemma, until now that is. The Berry School Book Club was an opportunity for us to set up an action learning project that it was envisaged would shed light on these questions, which in turn would assist class teachers as they developed the writing skills of their charges.

In 2011, I was invited by the principal at the time, Peter Burney, to work with the school as a ‘critical friend’. I jumped at the chance, since I live about ten minutes away and enjoy being involved in schools. Berry Public School is in an old rural town within a farming community, approximately two hours south of Sydney. The school is considered to be above average on the Index of Socio-Educational Advantage Index (see Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, n.d.) and thus receives no additional funding.

For the focus for the Berry School Book Club, it was decided to engage prolific readers in:

- reading, reflecting and critiquing books;
- exploring the writing devices of the authors they read;
- reading like writers and thus improving their writing;
- teaching children to get inside the author’s head.

Such a focus reflected the school’s literacy strategy that indicated that there was a need to provide an additional challenge for a small group of prolific readers in Years 4, 5 and 6 and to develop imagery in children’s literary writing.

Our underlying philosophy, clearly articulated to teachers, children and parents, has been that ‘children must read like a writer, in order to learn to write like a writer’ (Smith, 1983, p. 562). In particular, we were guided by Smith’s assertion that when reading:

The author becomes an unwitting collaborator [teacher]. ... Bit by bit, one thing at a time, but enormous amounts of things over the passage of time, the learner learns, through reading like a writer, to write like a writer. (p. 564)

However, we were very conscious of Smith’s warnings that, in order to be able to read like a writer, one must do so in a special way. We must perceive ourselves to be writers; we need to read in a way in which we engage with the author as a teacher or mentor, and we need to ‘get inside the head’ of the author.

And so we began. Our Action Learning Team, Susan McAuliffe (class teacher), Di Hill (librarian) and Peter Burney (Principal)¹ first ran Book Club during the lunch period with a group of eight children. For many reasons this was not very successful for me, the children or the teachers – not enough time, children forgetting and running off to play, soccer practice. In true action learning fashion, the team met and we made some critical changes.

Berry School Book Club 2012

It was decided that Book Club be moved into school time. It was scheduled from 2.00–3.00 pm every second Monday in the school library (there are no library classes on Mondays). Rather than one group of eight facilitated by me, we expanded the membership to twenty children who would operate in four teams led by one of the four school leaders. My role would be to facilitate and oversee the teams in action. Susan (class teacher) and Di (Librarian) would be involved in all decisions, particularly in the choice of the book to be read. Children would purchase the chosen book through Di in the library. Susan would keep all Year 4, 5 and 6 teachers informed about what happening in Book Club, and Peter (Principal) would seek permission from parents and keep the Berry School Community informed.

Another important change was to introduce a time for writing within the one hour.

Children would be expected to read the chosen book in their own time. Those chosen to participate in Book Club would be required to participate for a full term. At the end of each term they could choose to leave if they wished.

Teachers from Years 4, 5 and 6 were asked to identify those children who were avid passionate readers and parental permission was sought for the children to come to Book Club. And so we began.

At the beginning of the year Susan and I met with the School Leaders (two boys and two girls). Susan explained their role in leading their team during Book Club. These wonderful children were given a list of the 16 students who had been chosen for Book Club and together they negotiated who should be in whose team. Supported by Susan who knew all 16 children, we soon had four teams that represented ages and gender. We were ready to begin.

Book Club organisation: Preparation

Each child has a plastic folder that contains a journal, a pen and as time goes by any worksheets or readings used during Book Club. Folders are handed out at the beginning of each meeting and collected again at the end. Writing is not marked, and, if chosen for a wider audience, is typed up with spelling, punctuation and grammar corrected.

The Team Leaders have an additional clear plastic folder that contains the list of members in their team. The Task Sheet they are to follow during each Book Club meeting is placed in the front of the folder. These are prepared for each session, listing the questions to be discussed and tasks to be completed.

Children buy their own book (organised through Di, the Librarian) and are expected to have read the required chapters for each meeting. They can, of course, read the whole book but are asked to revisit particular chapters for each meeting. And they are expected to bring their books to each meeting (something often forgotten!).

The literature is decided after discussion with Susan and Di and becomes the focus for the school term. Thus far, we have read novels, had a focus on poetry (in particular, list poems and Australian bush ballads) and picture books.

A critical part of my role as the facilitator of Book Club is to read the chosen book several times. First I read the book for the story line. I then revisit it, reading the chapters 'as a prospective teacher of writing'. I make notes as to the literary devices the author has used to develop characters, setting, plot, imagery, tension, fear, humour and so on. Before each meeting, I have to reread the set chapters yet again in order to design activities, and pose questions that will lead the children to begin to explore the design and construction of the text, the linguistic choices made by the author, how such choices allow them to see, smell, feel, hear what is happening in the story. In other words – to read like a writer – and discuss the literary devices used by the author.

Book Club organisation: Schedule

The one hour is broken into three sections. Each has particular purposes and expected outcomes, which are clearly articulated to the Team Leaders and their respective teams.

Setting the scene (2.00–2.20 pm)

Children come straight to the library at the end of afternoon recess. The roll is taken to make sure all children who are supposed to be at Book Club are actually there. We then participate in various activities. These serve two main purposes. Purpose one is to provide background to the current literary focus. For instance, when we read *White crane* by Sandy Fussell, we

visited her website and listened to Sandy sharing how she chose to write the Samurai series. We were even able to organise to Skype Sandy and ask her our own questions during one meeting.

When reading *Mahtab's story*, we watched a YouTube clip where Libby Gleeson introduces the young girl who gave her the background for the book. Sometimes excerpts are read from the authors' sites as to where ideas come from, how many times they draft and redraft their writing and more. On Jackie French's site she shares her passion for history and thus why she loves to write historical novels, and the years of research she undertook before she could even begin to write *Nanberry: Black brother white*. When reading *Banjo Paterson's bush ballads*, we explored A.B. Paterson's life, looked at photos of him and discussed the range of writing he did and why he wrote.

Such background is important for the children to begin to 'know' the authors they are reading; not just know their names, but to know who these people are, what their likes and dislikes are. I want them to become 'friends' to the children. What began to happen was that many children found additional information about their 'friends' which they shared with the group. Many also started to read other books by the same author and shared these with the group. During our discussion we always refer to the author by first name: Libby shares Mahtab's fear in her choice of words ...; Listen to the way Jackie describes ...

Purpose two is to share with the children the particular literary focus to be discussed during their teamwork. Sometimes this is a simple statement. Other times I model the focus by reading excerpts and making explicit why I chose these. For example, when reading Sandy Fussell's *Owl ninja*, I read an excerpt from Chapter 4 called Hell Valley, asking the children to close their eyes and listen for the words and phrases Sandy chooses that help us see, hear, feel and smell Hell Valley. I show the children the excerpt on the Interactive White Board and identify particular words and phrases in the first paragraph that allowed me to see, hear, and smell what Hell Valley was like. I reread the excerpt as the children read along silently. I then ask them for their examples. I take one or two examples before telling the children that this is the focus for their team discussion and send them off to their tables. It should also be noted that we discuss the themes and story line of the texts, but with less a focus than one might take in the traditional book club.

Teams at work (2.20–2.45 pm)

Discussion time: Team Leaders take their teams to a table in the library and pose the questions listed in their leaders' folder. My role – and other teachers' (Susan, Di, Peter and Bob) who are able to be present – is to move around and 'eavesdrop' on the discussion. If needed, we may add prompts to lead the children's discussion.

Some examples of the questions posed are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Examples of questions to prompt discussion

Owl ninja by Sandy Fussell:

- In Chapter 3, the Cockroach Ryu heads off through the village to see the Emperor. What has changed in the village and why?
- In Chapter 4, Sandy takes us into Hell Valley. Between pages 58 and 65 Sandy uses adjectives and phrases (and similes and metaphors) to provide us with a vivid image of why it is called Hell Valley.
- Look through these pages and find words and phrases that allow you to see, hear, smell and feel what the Cockroaches are experiencing. Share with your team.

Nanberry: Black brother white by Jackie French:

- Reread chapter 37, *Nanberry*.
- Jackie French describes what it was like on the ship in the first paragraph. Where are the verbs in the first paragraph?
- Discuss this in your group and the image these sentences create for you of what it was like on a sailing ship.
- Find at least four descriptive sentences that paint a vivid image for you.
- Find three short sentences. What is their impact on you as a reader?
- Find two sentences with a colon (:) or hyphen (-). Why does Jackie use these in her sentences?

Mahtab's story by Libby Gleeson:

- Look at p. 45. Libby begins with a short sentence; she then ends the paragraph with lots of questions. These are called rhetorical questions. How do these make you, the reader, feel?
- Libby uses this device many times. Why does she do this?
- Why is Mahtab's gold bracelet so important in the story? What happens to it?
- Mahtab's family's journey takes them many months. Talk about how they had to live in Quetta (Pakistan) in a small tin shed. What did they do during the days? How would you feel if you if this had been you?

Power Writing is carried out at the tables. It is an adaptation of Macrorie's (1985) 'writing freely' (p. 18). After approximately 12 to 14 minutes of discussion, we prepare for Power Writing. The children take out their journal, write the date on a new page and wait for me to give a topic. They know they are to write freely, without stopping, on whatever comes into their heads when I announce the topic. When we first began they wrote for two minutes. We now write for four minutes. Topics are usually broad and are chosen to provide opportunities for the children to experiment with the literacy devices that they discussed earlier. There is no discussion time about what to write, just a brief topic given. Sometimes they have a choice between several words or phrases. For example, after the discussion of *Mahtab's story* above, the topic choice was: fear, boredom.

At other times, one word is chosen; for example, after the discussion of *Nanberry*, the topic was 'the sea', and after the discussion of *Owl ninja*, the topic was 'night'.

Instructions are simple; once they all have their journals open and pens ready, I announce, 'You have four minutes to write on the topic, 'the sea'. Go!' And the timer begins. Silence descends as the children write. When four minutes are up, I quietly tell the children to complete 'that thought'. The Team Leader then takes over and asks individual children to share his/her writing. A child can choose not to share, but this rarely happens. Once all have shared, the Team Leader negotiates with their team to choose the person who is to share in the Wrap Up session. This usually occurs with the leader asking for votes. The children are very democratic.

Sharing and Wrap Up (2.45–3.05 pm)

The children pack up their folders and come together as a whole group. The Team Leaders indicate those chosen to share. We listen and children are asked to comment. It is after such a reading that I identify, where relevant, where the writer has used literary devices or structures 'like we read in Libby's writing'. Table 2 provides some examples of the children's writing from the Power Writing sessions.

Table 2. Examples of children's writing from the Power Writing sessions

Fear

Fear is a dreaded devil that creeps up alleyways in the night. It is innocent children having delicate sobs about secret things that terrify them. Fear knows all. Fear can come from anywhere: some from our imagination, some are real. You have to learn to fight fear. Everyone does eventually.

Fear is a distant shadow closing in, always lingering in the darkest places, the saddest of times. Fear drains all the laughter and happiness from our minds. Fear is coming. Quick turnaround! Is he here now?

The Sea

Crashing waves rolling onto the shore. Kids running in and out dodging waves and crabs. Dolphins catching waves with surfers and gliding under the surface. I walk along following them until they disappear into the distance.

Shells scatter across the sand and washing up with the water. As the water moves back out into the ocean it leaves the sand rippled. Feet sink into the sand leaving footprints wherever you go, soon to get washed away again when the water reaches them.

Night

The dark night fell early on the arena. Something was expected to happen. The birds fell silent and so did the surroundings. All was eerily quiet until a deathly scream shattered the leaves on the trees. Footsteps were pounding the dry earth, coming closer and closer until a figure crashed through the trees. Behind them, shadowed by the night some kind of animals emerged from the shadows into the moonlight.

Final thoughts

As I reflect on our action learning project, I believe we are beginning to find answers as to how we can teach children to 'read like a writer'. Critical in this process is that the children need to perceive themselves as writers, need opportunities to read, reflect and critique texts, with many opportunities to explore, and discuss the writing devices of the authors they read. Providing risk-free opportunities to write freely provides opportunities for the children to experiment with words and literary devices as they create images and cohesive texts. Our young readers and writers are demonstrating that they are indeed developing the ability to get inside an author's head and 'read like the writer' in order to write for readers. We are seeing the children move to a metacognitive level of understanding about the design and construction of texts that entertain and above all capture readers' attention.

In a recent survey the children were asked to comment on what they had learned 'about writing from Libby Gleeson's writing'. The following were some of the comments that were made:

- To paint pictures in people's minds;
- To actually make myself one of the characters and imagine how I would feel if I was somebody in the book;
- To be descriptive and make an image using powerful words;
- The impact of short sentences;
- Use of rhetorical questions;
- Using a mix of short and long sentences;
- Using writing to build up tension;
- Different writing techniques.

The model in Figure 1 best depicts what we believe is happening in the Berry School Book Club. Children are developing as writers with the support and input from the teacher, the text and the author. All play a pivotal and synergistic role.

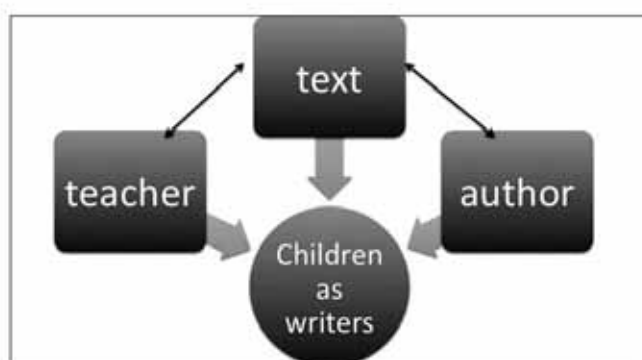


Figure 1. Model of relationship between the teacher, the text and the author in developing writers

Our action learning project continues as we begin to consider how we can adapt what is happening now in order to be used in the classroom. There is still much to learn, but we are excited with what we have learned thus far.

Note

- 1 In 2013, Mr Bob Willetts came to the school as Principal. Bob is equally as supportive of the project and we are presently developing plans for adapting the program for Year 4 and Year 5 classrooms in 2014.

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