OF SCARECROWS AND AVALANCHES
Looking at Children's Writing

Sandra Wilde

A researcher looking at children's writing sometimes feels like an archaeologist; a simple artifact, unprepossessing on the surface, can, if one knows what to look for, tell a great deal about the life of the person who produced it. To put it another way, a child's written story is just the tip of the iceberg.

This writer was recently a part of a research project, directed by Yetta Goodman at the University of Arizona and funded by the National Institute of Education, which observed ten children from the O'odham (Papago) tribe writing in the classroom during their third- and fourth-grade years. Two pieces of writing by a single child (out of 288 texts collected), along with data about what went on during the writing process, will suggest what a small amount of data can show us about the writing process, children, and language use. It should be noted that just as an archaeologist doesn't base theory on a single piece of pottery, the conclusions and implications suggested here are grounded in the study as a whole. But looking at just a few pieces of writing is not only a useful way to illustrate those more general conclusions but also a reminder of the wealth of information contained in a single artifact. In this case, information is available about semantic/pragmatic, linguistic, and developmental processes, with a major generalization emerging about each one. Each of these generalizations also suggests implications for teachers.

The first of these generalizations is that the creation of meaning, the semantic and pragmatic choices that are made about a piece of writing, is a complex and not always visible process.

The process is, first of all, a complex one because a writer must make multiple decisions about every piece of writing, as Gordon’s scarecrow story, following, illustrates:

One Halloween night when I was trick or treating, I saw a scarecrow. It was alive, then it started to chase. Then I ran all the way home, but there Jack-o’-lantern it was. I was chasing me too. Then two things were chasing me. I was tired of running and I fell down on some grass and I fell asleep for two nights.

These decisions include: What to write about. In this case, Gordon used a story-starter his teacher had provided — a Hallowe’en paper doll of a scarecrow with a suggestion that the children write a story about it. Gordon used this stimulus only as a jumping-off point.

How to begin. Unlike many of us who agonize over that first sentence, most of the time Gordon began his stories by quickly writing “One day” and letting the piece flow from there. (In this case he did so at first, then changed to the appropriate variation, “One Halloween night.”)

This routinized beginning shows Gordon’s confidence and eagerness to get into his story as quickly as possible.
What genre to use. The writer must decide whether to write a personal or non-personal piece, a narrative or exposition. Gordon often wrote fictional first-person narratives like this one.

How to shape the piece. Gordon’s stories always showed a strong beginning, middle and end. It was usually only if he ran out of time that his pieces lacked an ending or seemed abrupt. Gordon also favors stories with a good deal of action, and with more stress on plot than on character or setting.

What other constraints to follow. For this story, Gordon chose to write exactly to the end of the sheet of paper, a common practice for him and for other children in the study.

The other important point about this meaning-creation process, in addition to its complexity, is that these decisions are not always visible but must often be inferred from the text itself. Detailed field notes which accompanied the writing of this piece show that Gordon talked a lot as he wrote it, but about peripheral or extraneous matters rather than the piece itself. For instance, he talked at one point about the physical aspects of writing, saying “I’ve got thousands of pencils,” and complaining about not having a pencil sharpener. Similarly, he comments about the handwriting process, saying “I wish we could write in cursive; I like cursive.” When he speaks about matters related directly to his story, they involve surface aspects, usually how to spell a word. Some of his talking is completely unrelated to writing; he discusses the Pac-Man television show and, looking for a word in the dictionary, spots a diagram of the solar system and reads the names of the planets aloud. Gordon’s oral language as he writes is clearly not a direct reflection of his meaning creation process, yet that process is certainly going on: the decisions listed above were made and the story got written.

Two implications for teachers suggest themselves. First, since written meaning creation is a complex process that involves multiple decisions (which increase in number as writers mature and texts grow longer), young writers need to be supported by being helped to explore their options, expand their range, and strengthen their ownership. Secondly, teachers must realize that children don’t have to be able to discuss writing in order to write. Most of Gordon’s decisions are tacit ones, not requiring verbalization and probably not even taking place at the conscious level in most cases. Becoming aware of one’s own process is a valuable tool but not a precondition for writing or an indication of competence.

A second kind of process which young writers are involved in is linguistic; the relevant generalization is that children are capable of using language in sophisticated ways, drawing on various types of linguistic knowledge. A second story of Gordon’s, “Avalanche in Bethlehem,” following, serves as an example of this.

As children mature as writers, they express themselves in syntactic structures that are increasingly complex. This story is distinguished not only by the length of its sentences (which average 15 words) but by the kinds of syntactic structures found there. Two sentences can serve to illustrate this. The story’s second sentence, beginning “In one of the houses,” inverts the subject and verb for a somewhat literary effect. In addition, Gordon uses a parallel structure which pairs “a lady and a boy” with their referents, “Mary and Jesus.” The effect of this sentence can perhaps best be appreciated by comparing it to a hypothetical alternative. If Gordon had written, “A lady named Mary and a boy named Jesus lived in one of the houses,” he would have used the same number of words but in a less complex and less original structure.

The next sentence of the story, beginning “One day when Mary was cooking” is complex in another way, through its use of subordination. The sentence begins with an adverbial clause whose object is yet another clause (“snow (that was) falling from the mountain”). In a sense, Gordon has done his own implicit sentence combining by uniting what could have been three short sentences into one complex structure. Although not all
sentences written by Gordon or the other children are this elaborate, these two sentences indicate that even young children are capable of a surprising degree of syntactic sophistication in their writing, a sophistication that comes not just from sentence length but from the ability to manipulate a variety of structures and to develop an individual style.

Gordon is also developing linguistically as he grapples with learning how to spell and punctuate. A series of vignettes drawn from field notes accompanying these two stories illustrate how active this process is. These first ones come from the Hallowe'en story:

* After writing a hyphen at the end of the first line, Gordon asks the researcher if she knows what it is and informs her that he learned about it from watching his sister write.
  * After finishing the second line of the story, Gordon wonders aloud if he should put a period after "alive," then decides not to "because I want to say something else."
* When Gordon is ready to write the word "chase," he gets a dictionary to look for it. While thumbing through it, he spots the word "jack-o'-lantern" then decides to leave the dictionary open to that page so he can use the word later in his story. Eventually a seatmate finds "chase" in another dictionary and Gordon asks her to "spell me it."
  * Twice Gordon goes back and inserts words that had been inadvertently left out. To do so, rather than using a caret, which he's not familiar with, he uses arrows, thereby "inventing" his own insertion convention.
  * When asked by the researcher why he wrote "but" with an apostrophe, Gordon replies that it's similar to the one in "don't," used when something is "sort of bad news."

These further examples come from "Avalanche in Bethlehem."

* After having just found the word "marry" in the dictionary for a friend, Gordon says "Now I have to find 'Mary'" (for his own story). He starts to look in the dictionary, then says "I think it's M-A-R-Y." When asked, he says that it's possible for words to be said the same and spelled differently.
* Gordon has a rule that when one doesn't have enough room to finish a word on a line, one goes up to the edge of the page, writes a hyphen, and continues on the next line. However, when he comes to the word "something," he breaks it at the end of the first syllable even though he had room for more letters. When asked why he did this, he could not explain and indeed later hyphenates words without regard to syllable boundaries.
* When writing "Bethlehem" for the second time in this story, Gordon asks if it always needs to be capitalized and then decides it does because it's a place name. He then goes back and capitalizes "Earth" because "it's the name of a . . . a WORLD!"

* When asked how he knows where to use quotation marks, Gordon replies that they go after the word "said" and volunteers that small lines are used for quotation marks "because when they talk it's like lines come out of their mouth."
* When asked why he uses an upper-case "L" in the middle of the word "Bethlehem," Gordon says that a lower-case one couldn't be seen and would look like an "l."

These examples have been quoted at such length in order to emphasize the variety of knowledge that goes into learning to spell and punctuate. Gordon draws on instruction (capitalizing place names) and learning from outside school (the use of the hyphen); generalizes from his knowledge of individual spellings ("marry" vs. "Mary"); learns, invents, and refines rules (for hyphenation, insertion, and quotation); uses resources such as dictionaries; and provides idiosyncratic explanations for some phenomena ("but").

These examples of how Gordon handles syntax and orthography suggest that children use linguistic systems in a way that is more active, spontaneous, and multi-layered than what is presented in structured curricula such as spelling texts or sentence-combining exercises. The use of linguistic systems we see here has the further advantage of being imbedded in an active meaning-creation process, where the form of language develops as a means to a larger end. This process provides an obvious opportunity for teachers to build on what children are doing — by noticing their hypothesis-construction, reacting to what they do, and making appropriate suggestions to help them integrate and further develop their knowledge. For instance, a teacher who noticed Gordon's use of arrows for insertion could comment on it and mention that there's a punctuation mark called the caret which is used for that very same purpose, giving him the option to use it in the future if he chooses. Since children are usually eager to do things in a more adult and sophisticated style, he would be likely to pick up on that option, replacing his invention with a conventionalized form. Sometimes teachers fear that linguistic knowledge — that is, information about how to spell, punctuate, and construct sentences — is so uninteresting that if it's not imposed on children they won't learn it. However, what Gordon has
shown us suggests that children are eager to explore and gain more control over language patterns when this activity is self-initiated and done in context rather than as abstract exercises.

The third generalization about young writers' development that can be drawn from this data has to do with how that development occurs and even more with how we look at it. It is that given opportunity to write, children will grow as writers, but this growth isn't obvious from a single measure or single piece of writing.

The study that these pieces of writing are drawn from found that over the two-year period involved all the quantifiable areas that were looked at showed change in a positive direction. Sentences became longer and more complex, spelling and punctuation became more conventional, reversals diminished. These changes occurred in classrooms where there was minimal instruction in composition, merely extensive opportunity to write. However, it is important to remember that any single measure of growth as a writer is an oversimplification, because of the complexity of what's involved in any piece of writing, fully, from observing and talking to the writer as well. Getting a real sense of a child's development as a writer is best achieved by looking at his or her whole body of work from many different angles, and focusing on the particular insights found there as well as on cumulative, quantifiable information.

If the lessons learned from these two stories of Gordon's and the larger study of which they are a part had to be summed up into a single implication for teaching, it would be the importance of trust — trust in children's innate drive and ability to become better users of written language, and to direct most of that process for themselves, and trust in our own abilities as professionals to use our trained instincts to tune into and support that growth. A child who can hypothesize that apostrophes indicate bad news is a child who is an active and creative thinker about language; that child's hypotheses will, given the opportunity to write and to talk about language, increase in sophistication, a process that will be even more enhanced by a teacher who can appropriately appreciate and guide.

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including but not limited to the meaning-creation and linguistic factors seen in Gordon's stories. A child may use sophisticated syntactic structures in writing pieces whose content and style are dull and unvaried, while another child writes exciting stories using short, choppy sentences. No one measure can capture these differences and others.

The complexity of the writing process also means that conclusions cannot be drawn from a single text but must be based on knowledge of the writer over time. For instance, Gordon's use of punctuation ranges from totally unconventional in some stories (as when punctuation is omitted altogether) to 100 percent conventional in others, with a good deal of variability over time. It is not that he learns how to punctuate and then forgets again; it is a matter of tradeoffs, so that on some days he is putting a lot of effort into getting the mechanics right while on others he may be exploring a new genre or writing rapidly about a topic he's very involved in, with less attention left over for spelling and punctuation. A single text is never an accurate measure of a writer's competence in all areas at that time; competence can only be inferred from looking at a range of performances across time and, hope-

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Footnote


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