Authentic Classroom Writing

In classrooms a multitude of daily practices are accompanied by writing. The school grounds are to be upgraded. The children sketch and make notes of the playground they desire. They submit their plans to the school governing body. They write up their ideas for publication in the school newsletter, which goes home to parents.

After experiments with magnets, the children write all they have learned so they can make a book to read to the class next door.

A book-launch of books published by the children is to be held. The children write invitations to family members, inviting them to attend. Writing is integral to life practices.

When one sees that writing is not an end in itself, one appreciates the part played by writing in all subject areas. Children write to hypothesize, to plan, to report on and conclude about scientific understandings. They write to plan social investigations and surveys, they draft questions for interviews, they write letters seeking information, and later they write to collate the data they gather.

If children are to value writing; if they are to come to know that writing is integral to many life activities then they must see connections between their lives and writing. Having children sit silently each day completing grammar exercises or spelling exercises in workbooks does not endear them to writing, nor does it teach them the benefits of writing for enriching their lives. Only when the writing curriculum of the classroom relates to the children, their families, their hobbies, their communities; only when it serves authentic purposes for them, will they engage with and value writing. Only then will they develop confidence in themselves as writers in a wide range of life activities; only then will they be strong enough to use their writing to protest injustice and to write for change.

Multiple Literacies

Allied to this view of literacy as social practice is the notion of multiple literacies. To live and function at this particular time one engages with different literacies. Think of electronic literacies. I write the manuscript for this book on a computer powered by electricity. I
can now communicate with someone overseas via email, by typing on a computer keyboard—again, powered by electricity. By clicking one icon on the screen with the use of a mouse one can send that communication anywhere in the world, so long as the recipient is connected to email. No paper is used; no pen, no quill. No middle person such as a postman or UPS driver is needed to help ensure that the communication reaches the recipient. In reality, I guess the service provider has become the middle man.

To access a Web page one needs to understand all sorts of icons on the computer screen and to be prepared to work in directions other than left to right and progressively down a page. The eye scans the screen, like the movements of a firefly darting through the evening air. Web pages offer many alternate pathways, unlike the novel I read of an evening, which flows in one linear direction.

With email we still spell words in full as we did in written communications fifty to one hundred years ago, although some word spellings may have changed. Contrast the written communications sent via the computer with those sent on the mobile phone. Because of the minute screen space, the language is extremely abbreviated. As with email, no pen or paper is used. A generation ago, who would have envisaged the thumb as writing implement! One wonders about the evolutionary change in the shape of the human thumb, with the speed and dexterity now observed in sending text messages. I observe young people’s thumbs move with incredible speed and considerable dexterity as they type on their phones. When I try to read their phones I am illiterate. A whole new language is being developed and used by mobile phone users. Consider the following:

- LOL laughing out loud
- SIT stay in touch
- TIC tongue in cheek
- TTUL talk to you later
- <Y> yawning
- <S> smiling
- 3sum threesome

—from WAN2TLK? LITE BK OF TXT MSGS (2000)

Fifth- and sixth-grade classrooms could well have those students with mobile phones record the language of text messages on a chart or in a book for the benefit of other students just learning about text messages. They are the experts in this new literacy.

Young students today play numerous electronic games and subscribe to magazines that assist in the playing of these games. When I attempt to read the N64 magazines, as with text messages, I again see quite abbreviated language where a letter equals a word. Not only older students but also very young students are practicing literacies not used in classrooms, with considerable skill.

Young children developing initial literacy knowledge and skills in homes where Internet access and CD-ROMS are available, develop skills appropriate to these
particular conditions and requirements. They learn to “read” these texts in the most effective ways possible. These are not necessarily the same skills and knowledge that accompany linear print-based texts. (Carrington 2001, 96)

These new literacies have developed as people have used new communication tools as part of daily life routines. It is a humbling lesson to those of us from older generations to find that in the company of our grandchildren, some are more literate than we are with certain types of modern texts. Not having a mobile phone I am absolutely at a loss when presented with a text message! Of concern in relation to the new electronic literacies is the exclusion of some families, for economic reasons. Computers are so much more expensive than pens and paper. It hardly seems fair that some children have their very own computers in their very own bedrooms, while others do not have enough food, let alone a single computer, in their home. In the future, economic factors may be a bigger determinant than ever before in who succeeds in school. Classrooms must keep pace with the times. Classrooms must keep pace with students’ lives. What are the new literacies? What are the literacies students practice outside school hours? Today, in planning for children’s development in literacy, we must plan for the new literacies so important in the lives of young people and in the education and business fields. To survive in today’s world we need more than the literacies of pen and paper, using conventionally spelled words in lines from left to right across a page.

How Are New Literacies Learned?

In a book about children learning to write it is timely to stop and reflect how we adults have learned some of the new literacies. Think for a moment about how you became proficient in using email. Did you attend lessons? Most probably not. How, then, did we learn? The starting point for me, and I guess for most people, was need: in my work situation colleagues were expecting me to have an email address. Different committees used email to contact members and it was extra work for the secretaries to post or fax separately to those without email addresses. Those without email were seen as akin to living with the dinosaurs. Once I had a modem and service provider, it was a matter of demonstrations from friends and much trial and error, in learning to use email. How important friends were at the end of phone lines, to get me out of trouble or to solve some new problem. How many mistakes I made. We see here the application of Cambourne’s (1988) conditions of learning to the process of older learners acquiring a new literacy. As we learn to email, we are immersed in what email is through incoming emails; friends demonstrate what to do; we are thoroughly engaged because it is imperative we become competent to survive in our professional fields; we engage in regular use, opening the emails each morning and replying; our learning involves making mistakes or approximations; the responsibility for the order in which we acquire the necessary skills and technical knowledge is left to us; our colleagues expect that we will
master emailing, no one is expected to fail; our friends respond to our requests for help
at the point of need.

We learn to be proficient in using email as we use it for life purposes, that is, as
social practice. I needed to learn how to email to be a proper functioning member of
various committees. I needed to learn to email to be a participant on list serves.

It is interesting to reflect how the language and structure of email messages has
evolved. When I commenced emailing I began with “Dear . . .” So did others emailing
me. No one does that now. Sometimes the recipient’s name is not even stated. It is as-
sumed if the email has been sent to someone’s email address that person will read the
mail and thus it is superfluous to add a name. (This never applied to snail mail.) The
literacy of emails has evolved and is evolving as we learn to use it.

It is salient for teachers who are learning new literacies to reflect on how they are
learning, and how important are kindly responses at the point of need, for this is what
their students are experiencing as they learn to write.

Children Explain Their Literacies

One way of persuading students that classroom life is an extension of the world out-
side is to invite them to bring their literacies into the classroom. I invited Shirl Ramage
and Annie Drennan’s grade 5–6 children to teach me their literacies. I could tell by the
looks on their faces when I first said this that they thought I was putting them on; how
could a teacher not be able to read or write something they could? When I explained
that, for example, I did not have a mobile phone and that I had never ever seen a text
message, let alone read one, they began to understand. Over the next few weeks, the
students’ task was to teach me and others who did not use their texts how to read them.
Some children explained different sports score systems, some explained electronic game
language, and Jonathan set out to explain how to use a mobile phone for the purpose
of sending and receiving text messages. All of the children’s first drafts assumed knowl-
edge about the controls or symbols that some of us did not have. When individuals
shared, all students were asked to question when they could not understand or “read”
the literacy being explained. Jonathan, for example, in his first presentation had written
that to spell “Hello” on his mobile phone, one pressed “h” and then “e” and so on. He
was a little taken aback when I asked, “Where does one find letter ‘h’ on a phone?” His
completed draft includes much more detail (Figures 3–2, 3–3, and 3–4).
Summary: Literacy as Social Practice

Today, language including literacy is seen as social practice. All the world’s people listen, speak, read, and write for purposes necessary for participation in life activities. There is no useful end in writing for writing’s sake. No one reads writing that does not serve some meaningful purpose. Today, with new technologies, we are able to write or create texts that challenge traditional ideas of what it is to be literate. Many young people are literate in ways older generations are not. To captivate students by the possibilities of literacy in their lives, schools must ensure that the literacy practices of the school curriculum are seen by the students to be relevant. If students are to be empowered by literacy and confident in their abilities to read and write and express their opinions in the wider community, they must see some match between how they read and write in school time with how they read and write out of school.