Frank Smith

Reading Like a Writer

The first time I explored learning to write in detail, I was tempted to conclude that it was, like the flight of bumblebees, a theoretical impossibility. I examined the trivializing oversimplifications that writing was basically a matter of handwriting and a few spelling and punctuation rules. I questioned the myth that one could learn to write by diligent attention to instruction and practice. And I was left with the shattering conundrum that writing requires an enormous fund of specialized knowledge which cannot be acquired from lectures, textbooks, drill, trial and error, or even from the exercise of writing itself. A teacher may set for children tasks that result in the production of a small but acceptable range of sentences, but much more is required to become a competent and adaptable author of letters, reports, memoranda, journals, term papers, and perhaps occasional poems or pieces of fiction suitable to the demands and opportunities of out-of-school situations. Where do people who write acquire all the knowledge that they need?

The conclusion I reached was as problematical as the riddle it was supposed to resolve, because I decided that it could only be through reading that writers learn all the intangibles that they know. And not only is there an unfortunate abundance of evidence that people who read do not necessarily become competent writers, but I had myself argued that fluent readers need not pay attention to matters like spelling and punctuation which must be the writer's concern. To learn to write, children must read in a special kind of way.

This article will follow the sequence of my reasoning. First I shall try to show that writing demands far more specialized knowledge than is usually realized, very little of which can be contained within formal instruction. Next I shall argue why this knowledge can only be acquired from a particular kind of reading. I shall then try to illustrate how this kind of reading occurs, and show that children are very

experienced at learning in this way. Finally I shall consider how teachers can facilitate such learning. I shall be concerned throughout with what might go wrong, so that even people who read extensively may fail to learn about writing.

The Complexity of Writing

Even the most mundane kinds of text involve a vast number of conventions of a complexity which could never be organized into formal instructional procedures. The scope and scale of such conventions are generally unsuspected by teachers and learners alike. Spelling, for example, demands the memorization of every word we are ever likely to write.[1] The "rules" of spelling can be numbered in the hundreds and still carry only a fifty percent probability of being correct for any particular word. There are so many alternatives and exceptions that we must confirm and memorize the correct spelling of every word we hope to write with confidence in the future, even if it does happen to be "regular." When does anyone check the spelling of all the words that are routinely spelled correctly, let alone commit them to memory?

Punctuation, capitalization and other "rules" of grammar are essentially circular and meaningless to anyone who cannot already do what is being "explained." Children are instructed to begin sentences with a capital letter and to end them with a period, but if they ask what a sentence is they will sooner or later be told that it is something which begins with a capital letter and ends with a period. The statement that a sentence is "a complete thought" is as inaccurate and useless as the assertion that a word is "a unit of meaning" or that a paragraph is organized around a single topic. How would anyone recognize a unit of meaning, a complete thought, or a topic in isolation? Linguists are unable to make any constructive use of such statements, which are definitions, not rules of application. They are meaningless to anyone without an implicit understanding of the conventions that determine what shall constitute a word, sentence, or paragraph, conventions which differ from one language to another. Unfortunately, those in possession of such implicit understanding tend to find the definitions transparently obvious and to regard them as the basis of learning rather than the consequence of having learned. Obviously anyone who can write must have knowledge of these conventions, but this knowledge cannot be made explicit and taught to others.

Even arbitrary "rules," descriptions, and definitions evade us when it comes to such subtle matters as style, the intricate registers that depend upon the topic of discussion and the audience addressed, and the "schemas" appropriate to the particular medium being employed. Not only must letters, telegrams, formal and informal notes, newspaper reports, magazine articles, short stories, and poems be composed differently, the format of the genre itself varies depending upon its specific purpose. Letters to close friends and to the bank manager have no more in common than news items in the *National Enquirer* and in the *Wall Street Journal.* These conventions remain to be fully investigated by linguists, who have only re-

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1. The arguments in this section concerning the inadequacy of the "mechanics" which are the grist of writing instruction are condensed from Chapter 10 of Smith (1982).

cently begun to analyze many critical aspects of language which everyone observes and expects, in speech and in competent writing, without awareness of their existence. There are, for example, the complex rules of "cohesion" which link sentences to each other and to the non-language context (Halliday and Hasan 1976). How could any of this be reduced to prescriptions, formulas, or drills? Even if we could and do learn a few hundred spellings, some useful grammatical constructions and some precepts of punctuation through diligent study at school, these would be only a fraction of the expertise a competent journeyman writer requires.

What about learning by trial and error or "hypothesis-testing?" I thought the answer must be that we learn to write by writing until I reflected upon how little anyone writes in school, even the eager students, and how little feedback is provided. Errors may be corrected but how often are correct models provided, especially beyond the level of words? How often is such feedback consulted, and acted upon, especially by those who need correction most? No one writes enough to learn more than a small part of what writers have to know. Most experienced writers can produce text that is right the first time, or at least they can edit or rewrite into conventional form, without extensive feedback, what they more hurriedly produce. Besides, if we learn to write by testing hypotheses in writing, where do the hypotheses come from? Practice and feedback may help to polish writing skills, but cannot account for their acquisition in the first place.

Learners need to find and assimilate a multitude of facts and examples, ranging from individual spellings to the appropriate organization of complex texts. Where can all these facts and examples be found, when they are not available in the lectures, textbooks, and exercises to which children are exposed in classrooms? The only possible answer seemed as obvious to me as I hope it now is to the reader—they must be found in what other people have written, in existing texts. To learn how to write for newspapers you must read newspapers; textbooks about them will not suffice. For magazines, browse through magazines rather than through correspondence courses on magazine writing. To write poetry, read it. For the conventional style of memoranda in your school, consult your school files.

All this seemed so self-evident, once I dispelled my own illusion that prescriptive instruction could and had to suffice for conveying even a modicum of what writers need to know. All examples of written language in use display their own relevant conventions. All demonstrate their own appropriate grammar, punctuation, and manifold stylistic devices. All are showcases for the spelling of words. So now I know where the knowledge resides that writers require. It is in existing texts; it is there for the reading. The question is how does such knowledge get into readers' heads so that they become writers themselves?

The answer cannot be that all this specialized knowledge is acquired through deliberate formal analyses, by sitting down with the particular texts and making extensive notes, memorizing data and examples. What is learned is too intricate and subtle for that, and there is too much of it. There is not enough time. Instead it must be that the learning takes place without deliberate effort, even without awareness. We learn to write without knowing we are learning or what we learn. Everything points to the necessity of learning to write from what we read. This is the trick to be explained.

Learning As a Collaborative Activity

The alternative I have to propose is that knowledge of all the conventions of writing gets into our head like much of our knowledge of spoken language and indeed of the world in general, without awareness of the learning that is taking place. The learning is unconscious, effortless, incidental, vicarious, and essentially collaborative. It is incidental because we learn when learning is not our primary intention, vicarious because we learn from what someone else does, and collaborative because we learn through others helping us to achieve our own ends.

Consider the range and extent of spoken language children learn during the first four or five years of their lives. Miller (1977) estimated that infants must add words to their vocabulary at an average rate of one every hour they are awake, a total of several thousands a year. Young children learn grammars (in order to talk and to understand) with a complexity which defies linguistic analysis. They master a multitude of idiomatic expressions and intricate nuances of cohesion and register which most adults do not suspect that they themselves observe, let alone their children. They learn complex subtleties of intonation and gesture. All of this is done without formal instruction, with very little evident trial and error, and with no deliberate diagnostic or remedial intervention at all.

There is an exquisite selectivity. Children first begin talking like their parents, then like their peers, and later, perhaps, like their favored entertainment or sporting personalities. They do not learn to talk like everyone they hear speaking, even those they may hear most. They learn the language of the groups to which they belong (or expect to belong) and resist the language of the groups that they reject or from which they are rejected. They learn, I want to say, from the clubs to which they belong.

This pervasive learning extends far beyond the structures and customs of language to mannerisms, dress, ornamentation, and larger patterns of behavior in general. It takes place in the absence of overt motivation or deliberate intention (as all of us know who come away from a film or a book acting the part of one of the characters). Engagement is the term I have used to characterize such learning (Smith 1981*a*). It is not learning that takes place as a consequence of someone else doing something, but rather learning that occurs concurrently with the original act—provided it is our act too. The other person's behavior is our own learning trial. We learn when the other person does something on our behalf, something which we would like to do, which we take for granted.

Adults have neither the time nor the expertise to teach spoken language to children. Instead, they act as a source of information for children and as unwitting collaborators. They are overheard as they talk to each other, and thereby show children why and how speech can be used. They demonstrate language being used for purposes which children would expect to accomplish themselves. Often the explanation of the language is embedded in the situation in which it is used—someone says "Pass the salt" and someone else passes it. Television is replete with such examples, especially in the commercial announcements. Sometimes the explanation is explicit, as adults or peers elaborate upon a meaning for a child, though the intention is no more deliberately pedagogical than it is when a child is told "Look, there's a McDonalds." And when a child wants to say something, an adult or a

friend helps the child to say it. No one gives a child struggling to be understood a low grade and a kit of instructions. But children do not need to be personally involved to learn to say what they would like to be able to say. They learn when others do the talking for a purpose they want or expect to share. In effect, adults and peers admit children to the club of people who talk as they do. They do not expect children to be experts in advance, nor do they anticipate failure. There are no admission requirements.

In such circumstances, children learn from what they overhear by "listening like a talker." They do not regard the language they learn from as something remote, an attribute of others, but rather as something they themselves would want and expect to do. They become "spontaneous apprentices" as Miller (1977) felicitously puts it, engaging in the enterprises of the adults or peers who are their unsuspecting surrogates for the trial and error of learning (and who since they are experienced tend to have a variety of trials and very few errors, a most efficient form of learning). The only source of the complex and subtle language that children learn for their own social groups must be speech they hear in use, to which they can listen like a talker. And clearly, all children who can talk like their family and friends must be very good at listening and learning in this way. They must have been doing it since before the time they could say a word for themselves.

Obviously children do not learn about spoken language from everything they hear spoken. Sometimes they do not understand and sometimes they are not interested, two circumstances which all teachers know are not conducive to learning (except that something is confusing or boring). Obviously also, children (and adults) can pay attention and understand what is said without coming to talk like a particular speaker. We frequently "listen like a listener" when we attend to what is said but have no desire or expectation that we should come away talking like the speaker. We do not see ourselves belonging to that particular club; we are not that kind of a person, and the vicarious engagement does not take place.

The consequence of not being a member of the club is dramatic, for children and for adults. We do not learn. In effect, the brain learns not to learn, it shuts down its own sensitivity (Smith 1981*a*). Exclusion from any club of learners is a condition difficult to reverse, whether we impose it upon ourselves or have it imposed on us.

Collaboration with Authors

I have discussed how adults and more competent peers act as unwitting collaborators as children learn about spoken language. Children learn vicariously, provided they can "listen like a talker" by virtue of their implicit membership in the particular club to which the practitioners they hear speaking belong. My argument now is that everyone who becomes a competent writer uses authors in exactly the same way, even children who may not yet be able to write a word. They must read like a writer, in order to learn how to write like a writer. There is no other way in which the intricate complexity of a writer's knowledge can be acquired.

Most literate adults are familiar with the experience of pausing unexpectedly while reading a newspaper, magazine, or book in order to go back and look at the spelling of a word that has caught their attention. We say to ourselves, "Ah, so

that's how that word is spelled," especially if the word is a familiar one that we have only previously heard, like a name on radio or television. The word may or may not be spelled the way we would expect it to be spelled. It just looks new. We did not begin reading in order to have a spelling lesson, and we are not aware of paying attention to spelling (and to every other technical aspect of the writing) as we read. But we notice the unfamiliar spelling—in the same way that we would notice an incorrect one—because we are writing the text as we read it. We are reading like a writer, or at least like a speller. This is a word whose spelling we ought to know, that we expect to know, because we are the kind of person who knows spellings like this.

Here is a second example. Once more we are casually reading, and once more we find ourselves pausing to reread a passage. Not because of the spelling this time, nor because we did not understand the passage. In fact we understood it very well. We go back because something in the passage was particularly well put, because we respond to the craftsman's touch. This is something we would like to be able to do ourselves, but also something that we think is not beyond our reach. We have been reading like a writer, like a member of the club.

On neither of these two occasions would I want to say that we learn as a consequence of what we read. We do not turn aside from our reading to study the spelling or the stylistic device that we have noticed. If we learn at all, we learn at the first encounter, vicariously, concurrently. If we can write at all we must have learned much more than we are aware of on these occasions. In fact I am inclined to think that the new spelling or style attracts our adult attention because it is an exception, because we know the spellings of most of the words that we read. We must have been adding to our repertoire of spellings at a rate approaching that of children's learning spoken words, namely hundreds, if not thousands, a year. We were no more aware of the individual learning occasions than we were conscious of learning the meaning of all the words we know. It is only after the event, sometimes, that we realize that we have vicariously learned, when we find ourselves using words, phrases, and stylistic idiosyncracies of the particular author we have read.

I also do not want to say that even accomplished writers read like a writer every time they read. It does not happen when the attention is overloaded, when we have trouble trying to understand what we are reading. (How can one read like the writer of something one cannot understand?) There is not much opportunity to read like a writer when we are totally concerned with the act of reading, with getting every word right, or with trying to memorize all the facts. It does not happen when we have no interest in writing what we read. We do not come away talking like a telephone directory after looking up a few numbers. And it does not occur when we have no expectation of writing the kind of written language we read. The latter illustrates my essential point again, the learning occurs only when we perceive ourselves as members of the club. We can and often do read simply like a reader, for whatever purpose we are reading. But to learn to write we must read like a writer. This need not interfere with comprehension, in fact it will promote comprehension because it is based upon prediction.

To read like a writer we engage with the author in what the author is writing.

We anticipate what the author will say, so that the author is in effect writing on our behalf, not showing how something is done but doing it with us. This is identical to the spoken language situation where adults help children say what they want to say or would like and expect to be able to say. The author becomes an unwitting collaborator. Everything the learner would want to spell the author spells. Everything the learner would want to punctuate the author punctuates. Every nuance of expression, every relevant syntactic device, every turn of phrase, the author and learner write together. Bit by bit, one thing at a time, but enormous numbers of things over the passage of time, the learner learns through *reading* like a writer to *write* like a writer.

Of course, there is also a need to write, especially for beginners. Writing enables one to perceive oneself as a writer, as a member of the club, and thus to learn to write by reading.

There is also a need for a teacher or other practitioner to be an immediate collaborator with the learning writer, for support and encouragement and also to provide knowledge of technicalities which a text cannot offer. Such technicalities range from the use of paper clips, index cards, and wastepaper baskets to the nature and utility of drafts and of editing, none of which is apparent in published texts and none of which, therefore, the author can demonstrate. One might add to the preceding list all the emotional concomitants of writing and its blocks, which people who are not experienced members of the club rarely seem to appreciate and which are frequently not dominant considerations in classrooms.

The Teacher's Role

Teachers have two critically important functions in guiding children towards literacy: to demonstrate uses for writing and to help children use writing themselves. Put in other words, teachers must show the advantages that membership in the club of writers offers, and ensure that children can join.

Teachers do not have to teach children to read like writers, though they may indeed for a while have to see that beginners get help to read. And of course, teachers must help children to write—not teach them about writing—so that they can perceive themselves as members of the club. Teachers must also ensure that children have access to reading materials that are relevant to the kinds of writer they are interested in becoming at a particular moment; teachers must recruit the authors who will become the unwitting collaborators.

In particular, teachers must help children to perceive themselves as readers and writers before the children are able to read and write for themselves.

It is not difficult to imagine how children can be helped to read before they can read a word for themselves. Someone must do the reading for them. Teachers should not be afraid that a child who is read to will become dependent or lazy. Children able to read something they want to read will not have the patience to wait for someone else to read for them, any more than they will wait for someone to say something on their behalf if they can say it for themselves.

It is instructive to observe what happens as young children are read to. First someone reads *to* them (they listen like a listener). Then the other person reads *with* them (they listen like a reader). Finally, that most annoying thing happens—the

child wants to turn the page before the collaborator gets to the end of it (the child is reading). Of course, a teacher may not always have the time to read with an individual child, but it is not necessary for the teacher to take this collaborative role. Other children can do this, or children can read in groups, or other adults can be recruited. The important thing is to make the reading a natural activity, preferably one initiated by the child for the child's own purposes, whether that is to enjoy a story, to share a newspaper report, or to find out what is on the lunch menu or the television program for the day.

It may not be so easy to imagine how children can be helped to see themselves as authors before they can write a word. For a teacher (or some other collaborator) to act as secretary for the child, taking care of handwriting, spelling, punctuation, and so forth, is not enough. There are many other decisions and conventions with which a neophyte needs help, as the following illustration will show.

The aim must be a collaboration so close that a child feels personally responsible for every word in a story (or poem or letter), even though the child did not think of a single word in the first place. First the teacher and child have to establish that the child will write a story, that the child is to be an author. The following dialog ensues:

> Teacher: What do you want to write a story about?
>
> Child: I don't know. (The child's problem is identical to that of a university student confronted with writing a dissertation, not that there is nothing to be written about, but that the number of alternatives is overwhelming.)
>
> Teacher: Do you want to write about an astronaut, an alligator, a wicked witch, a baseball star, or yourself?
>
> Child: An astronaut.
>
> Teacher (writes down the title): How does the story start?
>
> Child: I don't know.
>
> Teacher offers some alternatives, the child decides, the teacher writes.
>
> Teacher: What happens next?
>
> Child: I don't know.

And so on. . . Always the teacher offers some alternatives, and the child decides. This is especially important at the end. There is a myth that children (and many university students) can produce only very short texts. But with appropriate incentive they can write on and on, until in principle I suppose the entire contents of their heads is unravelled. The child's problem (and that of the university student) is most likely to be lack of an appropriate convention for ending. If you do not know how to stop you might just as well stop now. So the teacher must offer a choice of exits.

And when they are done the child feels responsible for the entire story, as indeed the child was. This was a collaboration, and the story would not have been written as it was without the two parties who were involved. It makes no more sense to talk about who did what than to ask who carried which part if teacher and child carry a table together which neither could carry alone.

To become writers children must read like writers. To read like writers they must see themselves as writers. Children will read stories, poems, and letters differently when they see these texts as things they themselves could produce; they will write vicariously with the authors. But to see themselves as writers they need

collaboration from an interested practitioner.

There is no way of helping children to see themselves as writers if they themselves are not interested. That is why the first responsibility of teachers is to show children that writing is interesting, possible, and worthwhile. But there is also no way of helping children to write if the teacher does not think writing is interesting, possible, and worthwhile. Teachers who are not members of the club cannot admit children to the club.

How can teachers learn to see themselves as writers? They must learn to read like writers themselves, and to do that they must, like children, collaborate with people who are also engaged in the enterprise of writing. For most teachers this should be easy—they can write with their own students, in a collaboration so close that no one can say to whom the successes and failures belong. What matters is not how well teachers or students may write when they write together but the manner in which they will read when they regard themselves as writers. Teachers who write poetry with children will find themselves reading poetry differently; they will be reading like members of the club of poets. And as members of the club, they will learn.

Overcoming the Constraints of School

Unfortunately schools are not always good places for children to see themselves as members of the club of writers. The membership fees may be beyond many of them. The way in which schools are organized does not encourage collaboration; it favors instruction over demonstration, and evaluation over purpose. A "programmed" approach can reduce literacy to ritual and triviality for many children (Smith 1981*b*) and leave little time for engagement in meaningful written language. Teachers can never be collaborators with children who regard them as taskmasters and antagonists.

The pervasiveness of the drills, exercises, and rote learning of programmatic literacy activities is such that some teachers tend to lose touch with what writing is really for. I can offer a short and incomplete list that will encompass more writing and reading than is possible in any school day.

Writing is for stories to be read, books to be published, poems to be recited, plays to be acted, songs to be sung, newspapers to be shared, letters to be mailed, jokes to be told, notes to be passed, cards to be sent, cartons to be labelled, instructions to be followed, designs to be made, recipes to be cooked, messages to be exchanged, programs to be organized, excursions to be planned, catalogs to be compared, entertainment guides to be consulted, memos to be circulated, announcements to be posted, bills to be collected, posters to be displayed, cribs to be hidden, and diaries to be concealed. Writing is for ideas, action, reflection, and experience. It is not for having your ignorance exposed, your sensitivity destroyed, or your ability assessed.

So how can teachers help children see the advantages and possibilities of the club of writers, despite all the constraints of school? As I have argued before (Smith 1981*b*), teachers must engage children in purposeful written language enterprises as often as they can and protect them from the destructive effects of meaningless activities which cannot otherwise be avoided. The first step is for teachers themselves

to be able to distinguish between meaningful writing and senseless ritual, and the second is to discuss the difference with the children.

In particular, teachers should try to protect themselves and children from the effects of evaluation. Where evaluation and grading are unavoidable, as they so often are, it should be made clear to children that they are done for administrative, bureaucratic, or political purposes and have nothing to do with "real world" writing. Grading never taught a writer anything (except that he or she was not a member of the club). Writers learn by learning about writing, not by getting numbers put on their efforts or their abilities. Children (and university students) who will write only for a grade have learned a very odd notion of what constitutes the advantages of the club of writers.

This is not a matter of "correction," which in any case does not make anyone a better writer. Correction merely highlights what learners almost certainly know they cannot do in the first place. Correction is worthwhile only if the learner would seek it in any case, and to seek correction for what you do you must regard yourself as a professional, you must be a member of the club. I am not saying there should not be standards, but that the standards have to come from what the learner wants to achieve. Emphasis on the elimination of mistakes results in the elimination of writing.

It is difficult for many teachers not to see evaluation as a necessity. It probably pervades the atmosphere in which they work. They may not have been told of its devastating effect on sensitivity or of its inevitable relationship with meaningless activity. Writing done for a purpose requires and permits no evaluation beyond fitness for that purpose, which can only be assessed by the learner by comparison with how the same purpose is achieved by more experienced members of the club. But that is always how children learn; they need not be told to find the better way for doing what they want to do; they look for it. Children never want to speak an inadequate version of the language of the groups to which they adhere, any more than they want to dress in a less than conventional way. If they are members of a club they want to live to its standards. A child who does not want to learn is clearly demonstrating exclusion from the group, voluntary or imposed.

School should be the place where children are initiated into the club of writers as soon as possible, with full rights and privileges even as apprentices. They will read like writers, and acquire full status in the club, if they are not denied admission at the threshold.

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