Developing Control over the Language of Schooling

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The "Process/Genre" Debate

In Australia for the last few years there has been much discussion about differing views of literacy education. In particular, the debate has centred on the relative merits of a "process/whole language" philosophy of learning and a "genre-based" approach to literacy development. In order to understand the debate, we could start with an historical overview.

Until the late 1970's, it was generally thought that children in Australian primary schools learned to write by practising the formation of single letters of the alphabet, putting the letters together in words (which had to be accurately spelled), and eventually copying out short sentences using these words. When children had mastered these skills, they were then allowed to use writing in such tasks as giving short answers to questions, copying from the board, filling in gaps, handwriting exercises, compositions and the occasional project. The model of learning underlying such practices was a behaviourist one – the teacher (or textbook) would identify the skills needed in writing, break them up into manageable bits, and drill them in a sequence leading from "easiest" to "hardest". When the whole class had mastered the easier skills, to a high degree of accuracy, the teacher then introduced the next level of skills. The emphasis was on fragmenting, sequencing, drilling, copying, testing and accuracy and there was a preoccupation with the conventions of handwriting, spelling, punctuation and grammatical rules.

Alongside these practices, there was an interest in ideas coming from the U.K. associated with the "personal growth" movement, where children were encouraged to enjoy language and express themselves freely. Then, about a decade ago, the teaching of writing in Australian schools underwent a revolution in response to similar ideas from the USA. Educators such as Donald Graves were exhorting teachers to "let children write". Right from the earliest days of schooling, teachers

were to create an environment where the children could feel free to experiment with writing, to progress at their own pace and in their own way – from scribblings on paper to the emergence of recognisable letters and approximations of "real" writing and to whole texts (i.e. meaningful stretches of language). Through immersion in print around the classroom and in shared reading sessions, through continual demonstrations of writing by the teacher and peers, the children came to recognise that writing was all about creating meaning using marks on a page.

As children started to write texts, they were introduced to the notion of writing as a process (or "Process Writing" as it is often called). In contrast to the former "composition lessons", where children were required to write

- a certain amount
- on a topic set by the teacher
- within a set time period
- with no errors

now they were free to write as much or as little as they liked about whatever topic they chose taking as much time as they needed. What's more, accuracy and presentation were only emphasised once the child has had plenty of opportunity to work on the meaning of the text, to receive feedback from peers and teacher, to revise as often as necessary, and to decide whether the text was worthy of taking to the "publication" stage.

This was an exciting period. Parents and teachers were amazed at how early most children started writing, how much they were able to write and how they appeared to enjoy writing. Teachers were learning new classroom management techniques which allowed for independent learning – how to be a facilitator rather than a director, how to provide sufficient time for the children to work on their texts, how to cope with the inevitable noise, how to arrange the furniture in the classroom to provide different spaces for different activities, how to display the children's work, how to teach spelling and handwriting within the context of the children's own texts, how to develop familiar routines which would enable children to operate productively in small groups, pairs or individually depending on what they wanted/needed to do at any particular time.

At around the same time, educators were realising that many of the same principles applied in the teaching of reading. Behaviourist practices were questioned. No longer was language segmented into an endless series of phonemes and blends, sequenced in order of difficulty, and drilled out of context. No longer were all children required to read the same book, chosen by the teacher, at the same pace. No longer were they expected to read out loud around the class – articulating the sounds correctly word by word. Now children were introduced to how print makes meaning in texts. They participated in "reading" Big Books in groups, guided by the teacher, who while reading would demonstrate how the sounds and meanings related to the print on the pages. They were introduced to the sorts of strategies that proficient readers use when reading – "book skills", predicting, guessing the meaning of unknown words, confirming these guesses by reading ahead, re-reading, using the surrounding context including pictures and layout. They were shown that reading was valued and enjoyable. They were surrounded by lots of attractive books from which they were able to choose. They were encouraged to read "real" books and good literature, as opposed to the contrived, dull readers of before. They were familiarised with certain modern valued authors and illustrators of children's literature, coming to know the persons and the processes behind the writing of the books. They were able to choose comfortable nooks to curl up in. They were given time to read.

People now started referring to "the Whole Language classroom", where reading, writing and oral language supported each other, where children were engaged with making meaning from whole texts, and the process involved in reading or writing a text was considered to be just as important as the product, if not more so.

In recent years, however, a group of language educators has started to query some aspects of the process/whole language philosophy. While these educational linguists share the rejection of behaviourist practices underlying the traditional teaching of reading and writing, and welcome many of the recent changes, they feel uneasy about certain developments.

To understand this concern, and the debate in general, we need to recognise the different theoretical backgrounds of those promoting Whole Language and those coming from the field of Educational Linguistics.

The Whole Language movement has its roots in a **psycholinguistic** theory of language. This theory is primarily concerned with "what goes on in the individual's brain" – the cognitive processes the individual utilises and develops in learning to speak, read and write. A holistic philosophy of learning maintains that people learn language best when engaged in· trying to make meaning from a whole text:

> All the linguistic and socio-linguistic systems and sub-systems need to be present. If young learners witness demonstrations of wholes of language being used and are constrained to engage with them they can, if they wish, focus on any of the sub-parts.... Whatever they decide to focus on there needs to be enough information there for them to gain insights into how the system which we call language works, and how all the sub-systems which make it up work within it.
>
> (Cambourne 1988:204)

Thus in Whole Language we have an emphasis on the processes and strategies that an individual calls upon in constructing meaning in texts.

The Educational Linguists have no quarrel with the notion of working from the level of the whole text nor with the centrality of meaning in language learning – in fact, their mentor, Professor Michael Halliday, was one of the first to stress the importance of meaning and text as opposed to conventions/empty formalities and the fragmenting of language into discrete units. But where the Educational Linguists, coming from a **sociolinguistic** background, do take issue with Whole Language is in its tendency not to address the social context of language learning – both in terms of **what** the children are writing and **how** they learn to write.

In the early days of Process Writing, two Educational Linguists, Joan Rothery and Jim Martin, undertook a major study of thousands of children's texts. Certainly children these days were writing, and often writing quite profusely – but writing what? Rothery and Martin were curious as to the type and quality of those texts. They found that the

overwhelming majority of children were writing simple observation1
comment texts:

e.g. **This is my mummy. I love mummy.**

and personal recounts:

e.g. **Today we went to the park. I played with my cousins.
We played on the swings and the slippery dip. Vera hurt
her leg. Then we went home.**

There were some attempts at narratives – often fantasy stories
by the girls or adventures and imitations of popular TV shows by the
boys – but though these were sometimes quite lengthy, they were
usually of dubious quality, structured with clichéd characters and banal
storylines.

The Educational Linguists were concerned with the social and
educational implications of these findings. They believe that school is
a social institution where children are guided to an understanding of
their world – an understanding which goes beyond the
"commonsense", the everday, the familiar which surround the child at
home. Education involves a more systematic and disciplined
exploration of their world – the social world of the self and others, the
world of the imagination, the man-made world, and the natural world.
These worlds are constructed in, and explored through, language –
and written language plays a powerful role in developing the child's
understanding of these worlds. In Process Writing, the children
generally were writing for the sake of writing – not writing to explore
and consolidate their understanding of the world in any sustained,
rigorous way.

The emphasis on personal, "creative" writing neglected the other
purposes for which we need to use written language to participate
successfully in our society – purposes such as organising information,
giving instructions, explaining phenomena, taking a position and
defending it, discussing an issue from various perspectives. An ability
to write for these purposes, as well as the more expressive, is essential
for success in school and the community. The Educational Linguists
referred to these different purposes for writing as "genres" (or types

of writing) and identified a number of genres which were considered to be important in the school curriculum:

Genre	Purpose
Recount	to tell what happened
Narrative	to investigate a problem/to entertain
Procedure	to tell someone how to do something
Explanation	to explain how or why
Report	to organise information
Argument	to defend a position.
Discussion	to explore an issue

Allied to this concern with what the children were writing, was a concern with how they were learning to write. In the early days of Process Writing, great store was placed on the child's "ownership" of his or her text. The individual was valued above all, and this individuality was nurtured without interference. This was important to counteract the previous practice whereby the teacher had total control of the topic, the length of the text, and the time allowed for writing. But in their anxiety to pass control over to the children, many teachers adopted a rather passive role, becoming a "facilitator" of learning, refraining from intervening apart from making encouraging comments during conferencing sessions. (Though in fact even a "facilitator" has a great deal of implicit influence on what is written, if only by default). This lack of guidance resulted in the repetitious texts and lack of direction discovered in Rothery and Martin's study.

Some children, of course, did manage to develop a degree of proficiency in writing for a wider variety of purposes. It was suggested however that many of these were children who came from homes where a high degree of literacy was in use and valued, more likely the homes of middle-class families. But what about the children from non-English

speaking families, or from lower socio-economic backgrounds? This was seen as a matter of equity – how could we ensure that all children in the educational system had the opportunity to develop the sort of literacy they needed in order to cope successfully with the demands of schooling? It was felt that the role of the teacher needed to be re-examined and this then became a central issue in the debate.

To find an answer to this, the Educational Linguists looked at how babies learned so successfully to talk at home and sought ways of applying these insights to the learning of written language in the classroom context. In contrast with psycholinguistic theory, sociolinguists such as Halliday and Painter found that it was not simply a matter of allowing the child to develop hypotheses about how language works by immersing the child in language, providing demonstrations of proficient language use, being encouraging and having positive expectations that the child will learn language given lots of opportunity to practise and approximate – though all of these conditions were beneficial. The role of the parent was seen as crucial in this process – not as a passive facilitator, but as a very active participant in the joint construction of meaning. During interactions between parent and child, the parent would provide a sort of "scaffolding" for the child – taking the child's initial utterance and extending it, or providing a more "mature" version, or asking a question to help the child take the next step – often making explicit reference to the language itself. The child was not so much "discovering" how to use language (the psycholinguistic view), as being inducted into the culture (the sociolinguistic view).

> (Father has told Mother of an incident at the shop. Child enters.)
> Mother: What did you do at the shops?
> Child: Jug.
> Mother: Jug! What did you do with the jug?
> Child: Break it.
> Mother: You broke the jug! And was Daddy cross with you?
> Child: (slowly grinning) Ye-es!

(Painter 1985:30)

The oral text does not "belong" to the child – though often the child initiates it. It is a co-operatively negotiated text, with parent and child contributing in different ways.

The text arises out of a shared experience, so that the parent is in a position to interact productively with the child. With explicit support from the parent, the child develops control of the language needed to participate in family and community life. As control of certain features becomes more assured, the parent withdraws the scaffold, or scaffolds at a different level.

Joan Rothery and some of her colleagues drew on these insights in suggesting a "curriculum cycle" which incorporated these insights of parent/child interaction:

- Within the context of shared experiences (e.g. a science experiment, research into volcanoes, a discussion about drugs, a book read as a class, an excursion to the zoo), a particular purpose for writing a text (genre) would be identified and focused upon.

- In helping the children to write in this genre, the teacher would provide support in the form of such activities as modelling and, joint construction. Model texts of this genre would be explored through a process of "deconstruction" – why do we write this sort of a text? who might write it? how is the text structured? what stages does it go through to achieve its purposes? what is the function of each stage and how does it contribute to achieving the overall purpose? what are some of the language features typical of this genre? Drawing on these shared understandings, the class would jointly construct a similar piece of writing, with the children's ideas being shaped into a text by the teacher, who would be demonstrating how a proficient writer might structure such a text.

- With an explicit knowledge of what is involved in writing such a text, the children would have a go at writing independently, calling on the teacher and/or peers for help

as necessary and referring to understandings developed from the previous modelling and joint construction.

Let's look at an instance of this curriculum cycle in action.

A Case Study

Just south of Sydney there is a town with a population from many different countries, drawn there initially by the work offered by the town's steel mills. It can be a pretty rough place, with social problems due to unemployment and lack of education. At one of the primary schools, the children were discussing with their teacher the problem that they were'having with the public phones in the local area – they had all been broken by vandals, causing great difficulty for people needing to making emergency phone calls.

Their teacher, Mick, decided to turn this concern into a learning experience. He was aware that these children would be going to secondary school in the next year, but many of them had difficulty writing the sort of sustained texts they would need for success in later schooling and in community life. He planned a unit of work around the theme Arguing for Change, aimed at developing their ability to change circumstances by taking a position and arguing their case. He knew that many of the children came from homes where little English was spoken and where the parents might not have been accustomed to stating a point of view in writing to those with the authority to change things.

Mick took up their indignation about the broken phones, and asked them what they were going to do about it. Their first reaction was to shrug it off with comments like "you can't do nothin" or "we could form a gang and bash them up so they wouldn't break them no more". But Mick persisted, pointing out that in a democracy we are all in a position to get things changed – but you've got to know how the system works. They finally decided that they might get some action by writing a letter of complaint to the local council or to the phone company, Telecom. In small groups they discussed what they might say to Telecom, and then went off to write their letters. Following some

conferencing with his friends, one of the boys, Slavko, produced the following final draft:
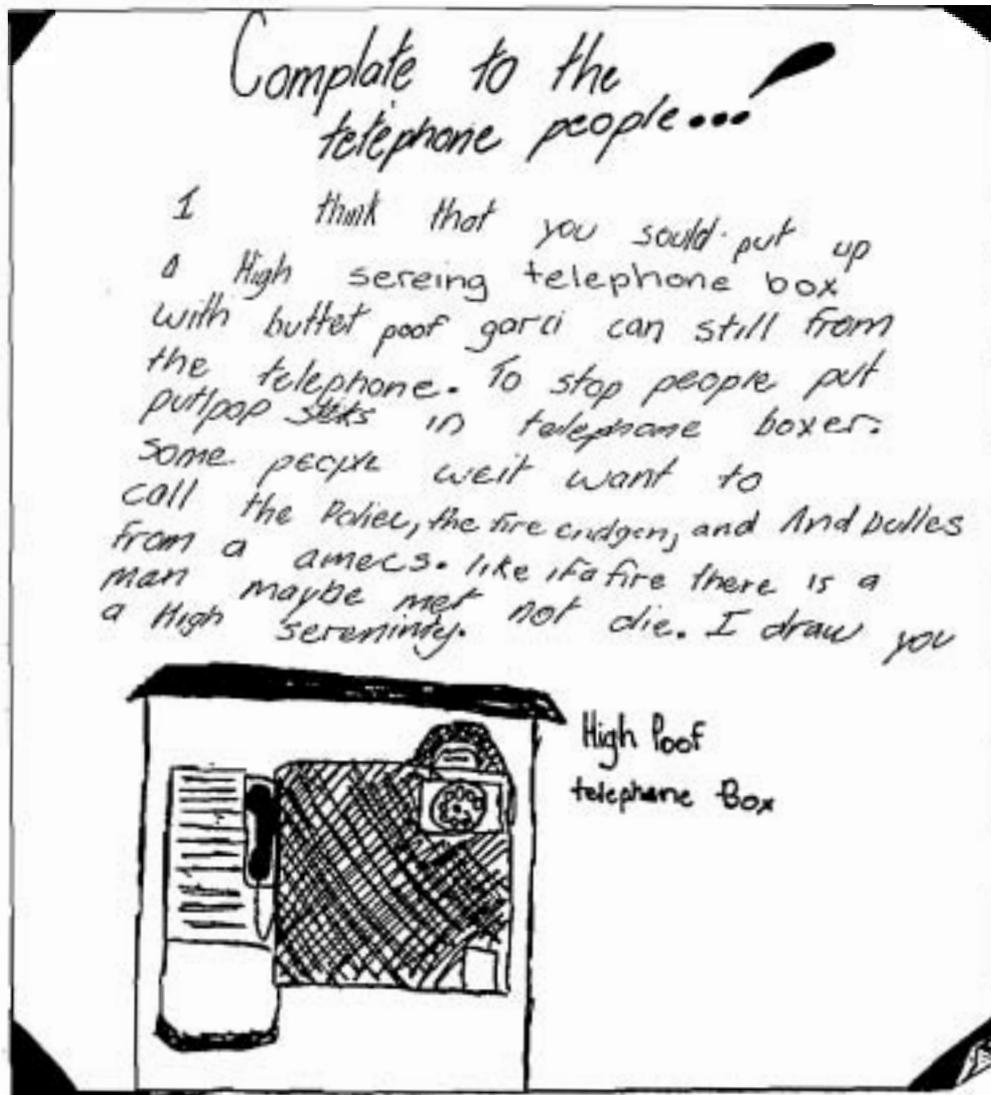
Complaint to the telephone people..!

I think that you should put up a high security telephone box with a bullet-proof guard so that people can't steal from the telephone and to stop people from putting Paddlepop [iceblock] sticks in the telephone boxes. Some people might want to call the Police, the fire engine, or the ambulance in an emergency. Like if there was a fire, maybe he wouldn't die. I draw you a high security [phone box]:

[amended version]

When Mick read the children's letters, many of which were similar to Slavko's, he realised that they needed much more help with their writing – not only with their spelling and sentence structure, but with the text as a whole. He started by talking with them about the **purpose** for writing this sort of text – i.e. to persuade someone to do something. And if we want to persuade someone, we first need to let them know what it is that we are concerned about and then we need to present some convincing arguments to support our case. We might also give some suggestions about what action could be taken. Although writing texts of this kind seemed almost second nature to Mick, he realised that these children might not have been exposed to such texts previously at home or school, so he found many examples – letters to the editor, petitions, submissions, editorials and so on – and shared them with the class. He also wrote a couple of model texts which they examined in some detail.

Text A

10 Johnson St,
Midtown
3.4.1990

Dear Sir,

Yesterday my mum told me that I wasn't allowed to ride my bike to school because she reckons it's too dangerous and I might get knocked over so could we have a bicycle path?

from
Tom

Text B

10 Johnson St,
Midtown
3.4.1990

Dear Sir,

I am writing on behalf of the children of Midtown to express our concern at the lack of a bicycle path in the town.

Many children live outside of the town with no bus service, but it very dangerous for them to ride their bikes to school as the roads are narrow and winding and the cars travel at 100 k.p.h.

If we use the footpath, pedestrians could be injured and besides, it is illegal to ride on the pavement.

A bicycle path would also allow children and adults to enjoy cycling as a healthy family recreation and would attract many tourists to the area.

In short, a bicycle path would be a great asset to the district and would help save lives.

We hope you will give this matter serious consideration at your next meeting.

Yours sincerely,
Tom Brown

Mick asked the children which one they thought would be more likely to persuade the council to take some action. They agreed that the second one was more effective – not simply because it was longer but because it presented its case more convincingly: stating the issue and indicating the writer's position, offering a number of arguments to back up this position, and finally ending with a recommendation and a request to take action. They labelled these stages so that they could talk about them when writing their own texts

- Issue/Position
- Arguments
- Recommendation
- Plea

The next day, the children arrived at school to find that their classroom had been broken into and the computer stolen. They were upset, so Mick again asked them what they could do about it. They immediately suggested writing a letter to the Principal, requesting greater security. In small groups they brainstormed ideas. They then came together and jointly constructed the letter, with Mick acting as "scribe" and guiding them in the organization of the text, reminding them of features of the models they had looked at the previous day.

"Have we stated what the issue is?"

"Have we said how we feel about it? What our position is?"

"Have we mounted arguments to support our position?"

"Have we made any recommendations?"

They presented their letter to the Principal and when locks were installed on the windows the next week, felt very pleased with the effectiveness of their effort.

Mick started the next day by asking the class to identify other problems around the school that they would like to do something about. They drew up a list:

- the broken sports equipment
- the lack of fruit in the canteen
- the need for shady spots in the playground
- the bullying of younger children

They all set about writing letters, identifying appropriate people to send them to, stating the problem and their concern, presenting arguments and making suggestions for appropriate action.

Meanwhile, Mick worked with a group, including Slavko, who wanted to continue with their letters about the broken phones. After a great deal of conferencing, drafting, revising, and editing, Slavko produced the following final draft:

To whom it may concern,

We have a complaint about the vandalization of public telephones.

We think you should put more security telephone boxes because if there is an emergency and people need to call the police or the firemen or an ambulance, the telephone boxes don't work.

We have an idea that may help with the vandalising problem. We would like to share it with you.

We think you should put the telephone inside a telephone box with bullet-proof glass and people should pay 20 cents to get into the telephone box. If someone tries to vandalise the telephone, the door would automatically lock and the telephone box would send a signal to the police station and they would catch the vandaliser. Please find a blue print plan of the telephone box attached.

We hope that you will give this serious consideration because it may save lives, and save you money which you could use to buy more telephones.

Yours sincerely,
Slavko Restovich

He had stated the issue, elaborating on why it was an important problem, he had made a recommendation, giving a coherent explanation of how it might work, and he had mounted some arguments in terms of saving lives and money. He felt much happier with his text and proudly took it home to show his parents.

Similarities and Differences

As in a Process/Whole Language classroom, the children were working with whole texts, learning about language in context and seeing writing as a process involving such phases as drafting, revising, editing and publishing. They were immersed in written texts, they experienced many demonstrations of how to write texts, they took a great deal of responsibility for their own writing and learning, they were free to approximate and learn from their attempts, they received a lot of feedback on their efforts, they had plenty of time and opportunity to use and practise their writing in a context where there was an expectation that they were capable of writing fairly demanding texts.

But there were also features which Mick has introduced into his classroom as a result of his experimentation with the "genre approach". Although Mick provides opportunities for the children to write on topics of their own choosing, he also sees it as important to ensure that they are able to write for a variety of purposes, in particular those valued in the school and community. Left to their own choice, most children do not elect to write such genres as Argument, Report, Instructions, Explanations, so Mick deliberately builds these into the curriculum, identifying appropriate purposes for writing within areas such as social science, science, geography, literature studies, and soon. His ultimate aim is that the children themselves will be able to determine the sort of genre associated with the purpose they want to achieve and to write in it independently, but until they have developed this sort of control, he provides a "scaffold" – supplying models, identifying those features which are typical of the genre and contribute towards the success of the text, demonstrating how to construct such texts in co-operation with the children, conferencing with the children about their own texts, drawing upon the insights into the genre previously identified and utilising the "language to talk about language" built up with the class.

Language is discussed explicitly in the classroom – not only the way the genre is typically structured, but other features such as appropriate tenor choices, the logical relationships between ideas and how to express them coherently, various resources we can draw on to make a text cohesive, and so on. These are not presented as "rules", but in functional terms – the sorts of choices available to us to construct effective texts.

In addition, Mick tries to link language to its social context, stressing the power of writing and how our command of language can influence how fully we are able to participate in society.

The learning of language is not seen as simply providing an environment conducive to the nurturing of the individual's unfolding natural creativity, but as a process of social interaction, where language is seen as a social phenomenon, not an individual's "property", and where language itself becomes an object of exploration and reflection.

The Debate Today

It is my view that Australian educators have benefited greatly from the "process/genre" debate. Certainly extreme positions have been taken, each side has 'caricatured' the other or simply failed to comprehend the theoretical model underlying the other's position, and at times relatively insignificant details have been blown out of proportion. No doubt this paper itself reflects some of these distortions – though there are those who would contend that it doesn't go far enough in stressing the different models of language, learning, schooling and society which underlie these stances. In the process of the debate, however, we have been forced to clarify what is meant by notions such as "creativity", "responsibility", "ownership", "natural", "individuality", "schooling". In addition, we have had to develop responses to issues such as the nature of learning and the role of the teacher, of the student and of language in the learning process, and to what extent an explicit knowledge about how language operates can facilitate learning and empower students.

At the level of theory, there are still issues unresolved and we are still challenged to justify or modify our positions. We have realised

that the way in which the original debate was framed in terms of "process or product" was in fact a false dichotomy and that even the distinction between "Whole Language" and. "Genre" has been misleading. The debate today has become caught up with the larger ideological issue of what might be termed "progressive", child-centred education as against a more "post-progressive" socially-oriented stance... but that's another story. In the classroom the heat has gone out of the debate, with many teachers getting on with productively applying insights from both approaches. The task at the moment is to foster and monitor these attempts, to share the outcomes, to continue to develop our understanding of language and learning and to guard against the misinterpretation and misapplication of theory.

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