Becoming a Writer: Examining Preschoolers’ Interactions, Modes of Participation, and Use of Resources at a Science Writing Center

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Abstract: In this paper, I describe the talk, activities, and nonverbal behaviors of 2 preschoolers at a science writing center. Both students became writers by producing multidimensional texts (e.g., letters, drawings) about frogs. Although group interactions and writing tools were important, access to the instructor was the critical resource both students required to create written products. The findings have implications for creating productive learning environments for young learners to practice writing skills across the content areas.

Introduction

From a sociocultural perspective, as young learners begin to develop writing skills, they rely on their knowledge of other symbolic forms of expression (e.g., talk, drawings, dramatic play). Therefore, early writing is typically multimodal, as children combine talk, drawings, objects, and gestures to convey their intentions in written form (Leland & Harste, 1994; Rowe, 2008). Further, from this perspective, writing is considered a socially situated act, mutually constituted by the writer, his use of and interaction with resources (human and material) in his environment, and his social and cultural experiences (Meier, 2000; Rowe, 2008). Therefore, to better understand how students take on the role of a writer during their time at the writing center, I find it important to study how they participate in writing activities and use the available resources in their immediate surroundings.

Interactions with peers, interactions with the instructor, and use of writing tools (e.g., paper, pencil) at the writing center may scaffold student’s learning of writing skills, help them reach their potential as writers (Vygotsky, 1978), and help them demonstrate their understanding of subject matter. Understanding which scaffolds prove most useful to students and how these scaffolds appear to facilitate their learning could prove powerful for structuring effective content area writing activities for preschool learners. Therefore, the research question guiding my analysis was: How does a student use the available resources (e.g., tools, interactions, talk, gestures, body positioning) to become a writer at the science writing center?

Participants and Setting

Two African American male preschool students, Joe and Bryce (both age 5), were the focal participants in this study. Video was taken in the students’ preschool classroom. The preschool was located in a public housing project in an urban area of the southeastern United States.

Data Analysis

The first author watched and transcribed a 7 min video segment of Joe and Bryce working at the science writing center with a teacher/researcher (i.e., DR) directly after a science lesson on frogs. At the center, students had access to writing tools, books about frogs, and a live tree frog in a small container on the table. Students were expected to draw a frog and write a sentence describing the frog. The particular video segment was chosen because it captured two different student approaches to completing the same writing task. In addition to talk, the author noted nonverbal behaviors (e.g., gestures, body positioning) in the transcript. To the right of the transcribed speech, an activity bar for each participant indicated what he or she was doing during each turn at talk. Eight distinct activities were coded throughout the session: (a) finding the frog, (b) drawing the frog, (c) using the audio recorder, (d) writing, (e) finding and describing the frog, (f) storytelling about frogs, (g) imitating a frog, and (h) looking at books. Portions of the transcript and images of participants’ interactions and positioning are presented on the poster.

Findings

Throughout the video segment, the importance of shared interactions and positioning within the group for becoming a writer was evident. At the start of the session, Joe and DR established an “F-formation” (p. 243), an interactional stance characterized by deliberate positioning, both physical positioning as well as the positioning of talk and behavior, to create and sustain an interaction (Ciolek and Kendon, 1980). DR and Joe achieved this F-formation by aligning their talk, body positioning, and gaze with one another as they attempted to find the tree frog in the container. When Bryce approached the table, he disrupted this formation by positioning himself between DR and Joe. The disruption caused a reordering, as each member of the group had to negotiate his or her position within it and attempt to preserve the group order (McDermott, Gospodinoff, & Aron, 1978). During this reorganization, Joe lost access to the group’s shared formation and interactions. Bryce positioned his body closer to the writing tools and further between Joe and DR. Additionally, Joe stopped making relevant
contributions to the group discussion and no longer aligned his gaze or body positioning with the other group members, further positioning himself at the margins of the group activities (Goodwin, 2007). Joe’s pattern of misaligned speech and behaviors continued throughout the first half of the session. During much of this time, he appeared one step, or one activity, behind what DR and Bryce were doing. Bryce began the task of becoming a writer early in the session. His ease into the writing role appeared to be facilitated by his access to important resources, including writing tools and a shared interactional space with DR.

The need for writing resources, and most importantly, access to DR, to become a writer was also apparent with Joe. Halfway through the session, Joe demonstrated an attempt to obtain “congruent alignment” (p. 357) with the others by loudly pronouncing the word hiding four times and synchronizing his first utterance with DR and Bryce (Goodwin, 2007). Following Joe’s overlapping talk with the others, his apparent bid for re-entry into the participation framework, Bryce moved his body away from the table. This permitted Joe to join the formation and to have greater access to DR. After this, Joe became assertive about maintaining his positioning within the group and more focused on accessing the necessary resources for writing. For example, Joe took a pencil from Bryce and pushed Bryce away when he leaned over to look at Joe’s writing. Further, Joe aligned his talk, gaze, and behaviors more closely to those of DR for the remainder of the session. Yet, at the same time, Joe’s shift into the role of a writer resulted in another reordering of group roles and organization. This time, Bryce faced the challenge of redefining how he would proceed in the writing center activities after the shift in group dynamics (McDermott et al., 1978).

Bryce made bids for DR’s undivided attention during the last 2 min of the session, showing his reliance on her as a resource for becoming a writer. He interrupted DR when she spoke to Joe. At one point, he even wrapped his arms around DR’s shoulders, laying his head on her. Yet, without DR’s sole focus on him, Bryce seemed to lack what was necessary for him to continue in his role as a writer at the writing center. Like Joe, Bryce made bids for re-entry and alignment with the others, but his efforts were unsuccessful, leaving him on the periphery of the group formation and group activities. Therefore, for the remainder of the session, Bryce reverted back to an earlier activity, drawing the frog (instead of writing about it).

DR’s status as a valuable resource, who students sought out and seemed to require for becoming a writer, became overwhelmingly evident in the last 10 seconds of the video. Seconds prior to DR’s departure, both students were talking over one another, vying for her attention. When DR left the table, Joe and Bryce stopped speaking immediately. Joe continued to look at a book silently, while Bryce looked around the classroom, appearing at a loss for what he should do for several seconds. In DR’s absence, the entire participation framework seemed to fall apart. Similarly, without access to and interactions with DR, both students were uncertain, unable, or unwilling to become a writer at the writing center or to continue producing written products.

Conclusions and Potential Significance of the Findings
Although Joe and Bryce followed different paths toward becoming writers, ultimately each student produced a drawing of a frog and a corresponding attempt at writing about what the frog was doing in the drawing. At different points during the session, each student lacked access to the group formation and the shared interactions of the other group members, and thus, he ceased writing. Bryce created an F-formation (Ciolek & Kendon, 1980) with DR at the beginning of the session, from which Joe was excluded. This participation framework with DR assisted Bryce in becoming a writer early in the session. When Joe gained access to DR halfway through the session, he too created a shared interactional space with her and then was able to produce a written product. Based on my analysis, becoming a writer at the science writing center could be accomplished in multiple ways and through different activity sequences, yet the process was chiefly dependent on each student’s shared interactions and joint activities with their instructor.

Overall, these findings lack generalizability due to the small number of participants in my analysis and the limited time I observed their behaviors. I provide suggestions for designing effective learning centers for preschoolers with these limitations in mind. First, based on my analysis, writing tasks embedded in content area subject matter can be successful and productive learning activities, even for very young students. The students in this analysis were not proficient writers. Yet, even at the emerging writer stage, they were able to produce written products related to science concepts. Second, content-based writing centers should be designed to include opportunities for students to collaboratively construct written products with their instructor, or perhaps, another more advanced writer. Third, and most importantly, the structuring of effective content-based writing centers should take into account each student’s readiness for writing and the scaffolds, both material and human, he or she needs to be successful with the assigned tasks. Future researchers could expand on my analysis by observing students paired with more advanced writing peers, to understand if these scaffolds prove helpful at preschool learning centers. Additionally, researchers could alter group configurations at content-based writing centers to examine if larger groups of students appear to benefit from this type of instructional arrangement.