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Notes for Contributors

Teachers and Curriculum welcomes

- innovative practice papers with a maximum of 3,500 words, plus an abstract or professional summary of 150 words, and up to five keywords;
- research informed papers with a maximum of 3,500 words, plus an abstract or professional summary of 150 words, and up to five keywords;
- thinkpieces with a maximum of 1500 words; and
- book or resource reviews with a maximum of 1000 words.

Focus

Teachers and Curriculum provides an avenue for the publication of papers that

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- reports on research in the areas of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment;
- provides examples of innovative curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practice; and
- review books and other resources that have a curriculum, pedagogy and assessment focus.

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WRITING ABOUT BUGS: TEACHER MODELLING PEER RESPONSE AND FEEDBACK

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Abstract

This is one teacher's story about teaching writing. It describes and explains how Mickey (the second author) encouraged her young writers (6–7-year-olds) to collaborate with their peers 'to make their writing even better'. The article describes how the teacher, Mickey, redesigned her writing lessons to further scaffold beginner writers. Mickey fostered peer response that involved the young writers working with partners—first by becoming active listeners, taking on the role of audience, and then by providing specific feedback on each other's texts. This resulted in Mickey's students developing the social skills of collaboration and capacity to engage in dialogic conversations. Furthermore, the students' developing understanding of evaluation and critique enhanced their ability to change and improve their own written texts.

Keywords

Teaching writing; peer feedback; teacher demonstrations; scaffolding

Introduction

Mickey (the second author) is currently involved in a two-year whole-school Teacher Led Innovation Fund professional development programme. Her school's nominated focus is to improve students' writing by incorporating greater use of information and communication technology (ICT) and peer feedback. As part of the teacher-led project, Mickey was keen to trial peer response with her young authors. At the time she made this decision, she had been provided with articles for professional reading and discussion, and she had attended a presentation on current research relating to feedback and peer response. She had also been involved in school-wide seminars establishing the school vision for writing and the role of ICT in students' writing. Email correspondence was initiated between Mickey and Stephanie (the first author and University research mentor) for the project. We (Stephanie and Mickey) had several conversations about how Mickey could use peer feedback with her students.

Scaffolding as a strategy to support beginner writers

We were keen to implement teaching strategies that regard teaching writing as an apprenticeship (Lave & Wenger, 1991) recognising that socio-cultural theories place value on student voice, ownership of the writing process, dialogic conversations and realistic contexts for writing (Dix, 2016; Myhill, & Warren, 2005). We decided to focus on scaffolding to achieve these goals. The notion of scaffolding is described in educational contexts as temporary supports provided to learners to enable them to complete a task that they may not be able to complete on their own (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). Scaffolding involves an interaction between the task, an expert and the learner(s). Each of the components needs to operate as part of a dynamic relationship; all components must work in unison to ensure a 'meeting of minds' (McNaughton, 2002). A key understanding is that any scaffold is not fixed; rather, there is an expectation of adjusting, and "controlling those elements of the task that are initially beyond the learner's capacity" (Wood, et al., 1976, p. 90). Together we recognised that Mickey, as an expert, could scaffold her beginner writers by working in their zone of proximal

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development (Vygotsky, 1986), a space where learning takes place when minds meet. By knowing her learners, Mickey could help them improve their writing by employing multiple scaffolding layers and adjust her responses to the children's immediate needs (Dix, 2016).

Teacher demonstrations

We decided to explore a key scaffolding strategy and apprentice the students' new learning through the pedagogical practice of modelling or demonstrating. Mickey referred to the New Zealand Ministry of Education literacy handbooks (Ministry of Education, 2003, 2006) which provide exemplars and affirm Cambourne's (1988) observation that teachers need to demonstrate the various aspects of writing; in particular, show that writing is malleable. Stephanie (Dix, 2003) had found that a group of nine and ten year-old student-writers identified demonstrations as the most supportive teaching strategy when learning to write in a range of different genres.

In modelling how to accomplish a skill or task, the teacher writes in front of the children explaining the thinking as she/he goes (Davis, 2013). Whatever the teacher is demonstrating or modelling, he/she takes a guiding role in composing or discussing elements of the text. This strategy enables students to become aware of decisions made when writing and that could be useful when creating their own texts. For some young children the biggest challenge in writing is how to record their ideas into written language: to encode the words into sentences onto paper or the computer screen with some accuracy. Through modelling, the teacher is able to demonstrate how ideas might be selected, discarded and organised coherently. By thinking out-loud, the teacher can demonstrate a range of skills such as semantic mapping, substituting vocabulary, and how to structure and write that first sentence.

Dombey (2013) supports the need for teachers to take on varied roles as an authentic demonstrator: showing students the decisions involved in the writing process; scribing for young writers as they orally co-construct a shared text; work as a response partner helping children become readers of writing and to critically affirm and comment in relation to the writing purpose. They can also take on the role of being an editor by discussing the accuracy of the spelling, grammar and punctuation. These roles were evident in Mickey's actions.

Audience response and peer feedback

Mickey recognised that her students needed a reader, an audience for their writing, and someone who could respond to their writing. She wanted her students to learn to give each other peer feedback to help improve their writing. From our discussions and readings, Mickey knew that peer response and specific feedback requires the child reader, as a responder, to listen to or read the writing by first focusing on the writer's message, then to reflect on the writing in terms of the intended purpose. This form of peer response and peer feedback requires evaluating and critiquing, quite difficult skills for young writers who must disassociate from personal and social relationships. As a response partner Mickey's students would need to step back and not only make affirming comments but also make judgements about the text and then generate suggestions that could improve the writing to meet the task expectations (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2007). Mickey knew from her own experiences and from the research literature, that modelling peer response and feedback would scaffold her students into this role (Dix & Cawkwell, 2011).

The teaching sequence

Mickey planned innovative writing lessons by selecting an interesting hands-on learning context that would motivate and engage her students—observing closely exotic looking bugs that were mounted in Perspex. Each child had a bug of his/her own to study and write about. The Perspex blocks were easily handled which meant that the bugs embedded in them could be examined very closely. The discussion that follows demonstrates the students' engagement. Mickey and her students referred to the small creatures embedded in Perspex as bugs. Although scientists would not think of all the creatures in the Perspex as insects, Mickey used language that her students could understand. In what follows the privacy of Mickey's students was preserved by giving them pseudonyms.

In prewrite preparation, Mickey established a long term learning goal *to help the students extend their written ideas by including specific details*. Specific learning objectives are crucial to provide teaching

direction and help the writer focus on the topic (Parr & Timperley, 2010). The specific learning intentions that guided Mickey's writing lessons were shared with the children. She wanted the children to

- learn to look closely at an object (a bug mounted in Perspex);
- write clearly using exact words when describing the bug;
- include specific details when drawing and describing the bug;
- use some scientific language to describe their bug;
- vary their sentence starters; and
- continue using capital letters and full stops.

The children were excited about having their own bug to write about. They were curious about their bugs; they looked closely at the bugs and discussed them using descriptive vocabulary and sentence structures that identified the characteristics of the 'creepy crawlies'. All of this motivated students to write about their bugs.

Diagram 1: Boys looking closely at bugs

Mickey modelled for her students how to discuss and generate ideas to describe bugs' body parts in great detail. She used written prompts on her whiteboard to guide her example. These prompts directed her students how to look closely at the size, colour, and the shape of their bug. Mickey asked the students to share ideas and consider the following questions: What colour is the bug? Are all body parts the same colour? How big is the bug? What about the legs, the antennae, the eyes? How would you describe its shape? What shape does it remind you of? The students chatted enthusiastically to their friends describing their bug. Mickey encouraged them to use specific labels such as feelers and abdomen when examining and describing the bug. She also had the students view YouTube clips of bugs to encourage their use of scientific language and to learn to look closely and describe the bugs' body parts.

Mickey modelled an example of descriptive scientific writing and recorded this in the class-modelling book (see Diagram 2). By reading, talking about, and highlighting language points of interest, Mickey presented the students with her version of what scientific writing could look like. Mickey then pointed out to students those aspects of her example that were crucial to the learning outcomes she had set out at the start of the class. Strong language descriptors and labelled body parts were highlighted and circled in the modelling book.

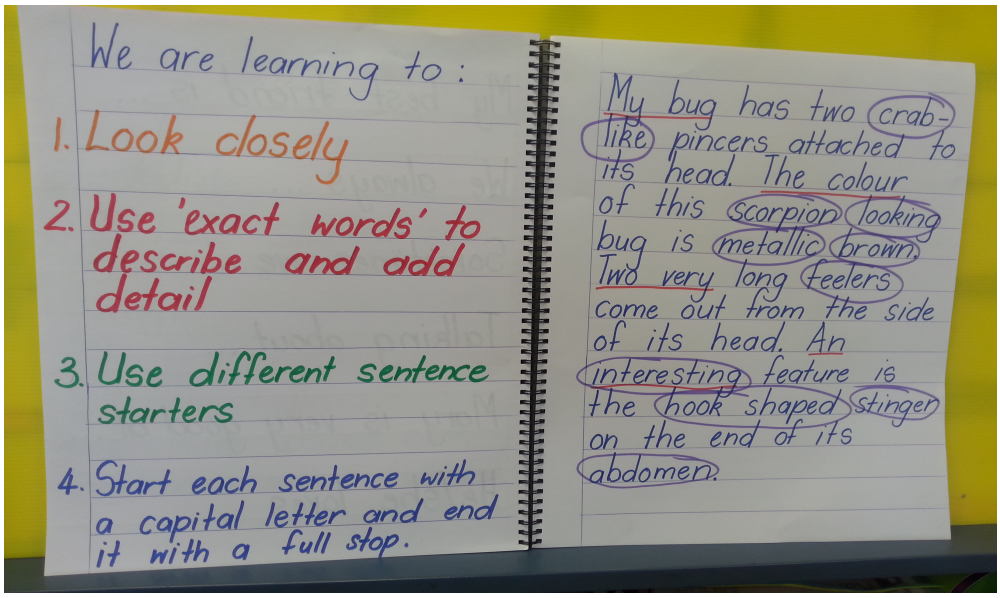

Diagram 2: The learning intentions exemplified.

Crafting the children's writing in three steps

Following Mickey's demonstration, students were first instructed to draw their bug in their writing books. While drawing students were encouraged to notice and draw their bug's hairs, claws, jointed antennae and other body parts. For young writers, drawing is an important part of the writing process. When children are drawing, words and phrases are generated. This helps them to plan and formulate their writing, identify key ideas, specific vocabulary and even consider writing about additional information that they have sketched (Ward & Dix, 2001).

The second step involved students composing their texts. The students were encouraged to look closely at their 'real' bug and their sketches as they wrote sentences describing their bug's physical characteristics. They generated sentences orally, they wrote them down, read and reread them, and (re)ordered the ideas. Composing sentences presents challenges to the young writers, because they must transfer the visual images they drew and their oral descriptions into written words—using another mode of language. Mickey also reminded them of the writing conventions, that is, that each sentence must begin with a capital letter and end with a full stop. In this way, Mickey supported her young writers.

Mickey's third step in scaffolding the writing required the students to review what they had written. This is a complex task for young writers as it involves evaluation of written content, critique and the ability to recognise what is not included and what should be included in the text (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2007). Peer response that involves student feedback and ultimately revision of their text was the scaffolding strategy Mickey wanted to introduce to her students for this purpose. Mickey was accustomed to writers' circle as a form of a social response and critique to writing but decided to explore another form of peer feedback and partner up her students. Two new learning objectives were considered. Mickey wanted to encourage the writers to

- engage with another students' writing, to be the reader/audience; and
- critique and make suggestions for adding more detail.

Because Mickey valued modelling as a teaching practice and her students had not experienced how to give peer feedback, Mickey decided to model this.

Modelling for students: 'showing how' to provide peer response

At the start of the session, Mickey acknowledged two students, Ron and Susie, for allowing her to use their writing for class teaching. She made reference to the learning goal and affirmed the authors' writing skills stating that they used 'wonderful things in their writing … they've got some really good detail'. Mickey then invited Susie to read her writing to the class. After Susie finished reading Mickey

posed a problem, to the class: 'But I've got another challenge—I'm thinking we will look at Susie's piece of writing and see if we can make it even better'. In this way, Mickey made the lesson's purpose explicit and invited the whole class to take part in learning.

> **Mickey:** We're just looking this morning to make Susie's writing—it's a good piece of writing—to make it a *great* piece of writing. An even better piece … Susie's told us a little bit about the colour. She's told us a little bit about the wings. And she's told us that it's got antennae and four legs as well [teacher points to Susie's sentences written in the modelling book]. What else could she add to this piece of writing to add more detail?

Mickey had enlarged Susie's writing and glued it onto the left-hand-side of her class-modelling book. The right-hand-side was used for writing down the students' suggestions.

As part of the decision-making involved in modelling, Mickey invited students to offer suggestions and provide further information that could be added to Susie's description. An interactive, eight minute learning conversation evolved with the all students contributing. Here is a section of the students' teacher guided participation and the students' feedback as they offered more detail to be added to Susie's writing.

> **Student** [Lana]: It has a triangle head.
>
> **Mickey**: A triangle head. [Pauses] … Very good. Now, Lana's looking closely, she's adding details. It's got a triangle head, and it does too. Pam, what would you think she could add?
>
> **Student** [Pam]: She could add that it has stripes.
>
> **Mickey**: It does have stripes. Where are those stripes?
>
> **Student** [Pam]: On her body. [Teacher: writes … Stripes on the body].
>
> **Student** [Ron]: It is very small.
>
> **Mickey**: It is really small. She could have said something about the size and shape, yes. Rob?
>
> **Student** [Rob]: It has a little bit of orange on the side.
>
> **Teacher**: It does have some orange. You could mention the colour orange on the side. A couple more?
>
> **Student** [Cameron]: It's got an oval body.
>
> **Mickey**: Oval shaped body. [Pauses] … I'm impressed. Look at all of the details coming. Fantastic.
>
> **Student** [Johnny]: It has wings like peacock feathers.
>
> **Mickey**: Oh my goodness, so it does. What made you think of a peacock?
>
> **Student** [Johnny]: Because it has spots like the peacock.
>
> **Mickey**: It does too. Shall we say … peacock looking [records the phrase]
>
> **Student** [Lisa]: It's got really little fingers.
>
> **Mickey**: Would we call them 'fingers?' What would we call them?
>
> **Student** [Brigit]: Feelers.
>
> **Mickey**: Yes. These are really little, little, little feelers.
>
> **Student** [Billie]: It looks like a preying mantis.
>
> **Mickey:** It does look like a preying mantis. Yes it does. We'll have one more from Lila.
>
> **Student** [Lila]: It's got a white dot on its wings.

Mickey: Yes, we must mention that—like how many?

Students: Two.

Mickey: Writes … And there's one on each wing. That's a lot of details there. What else could we say? Jack?

Student [Jack]: It's got bends in its legs.

Mickey: Yes, its legs are bending. I'm thinking of one more. Billie?

Student [Billie]: There are little lines coming out from under its wings.

Mickey: There are little lines coming out from. Can anyone see those really fine lines—almost like little hairs coming out from under its two big wings. I'm going to add one more [description].

Mickey: [She writes see-through]. That's another fancy word—if we're looking at exact words for 'see-through we could say transparent. Transparent—that's a big word. But it is see through. It's so thin and fine we can see through it. I'll put the word here.

As the children contributed and offered further information, Mickey recorded their ideas, which filled a page in the class-modelling book. Mickey commented to Stephanie that she 'was genuinely surprised at the number of suggestions, and additional details the children noticed'.

Diagram 3: Mickey also used Ron's writing to model how to add more detail

Handover learning: Students and peer response

On returning to the mat after time-out for a break, Mickey carefully explained to the students that they would sit knee-to-knee working in pairs and take turns to read and listen to each other's writing. She gave clear instructions that each student would offer one or two suggestions for adding more detail to their partner's writing. The bug, captured in Perspex, would provide the visual prompt for students' writing and the peer's critique of the content of their partner's writing and the subsequent feedback.

To support the students' participation in peer response, Mickey emphasised that students 'needed to listen to their partner's reading and that they needed to focus only on details of what the bug looked like, not punctuation this time'.

The children were eager to participate in the peer response and feedback. The classroom buzzed with students reading their writing to a partner, their audience. Students carefully listened to each other and offered serious ideas for more detailed information to be included in the writing. For example, as Lulu read her writing Jack listened attentively and then suggested: "Maybe you could talk about its tiny head." Lulu accepted this comment and also added one of her own. When Jack read his writing, there was a great discussion with Lulu as she insisted that Jack be specific and include the exact number of legs on his insect. Mickey's careful modelling and the instructions given for partner response scaffolded the handover of learning, creating a buzz of excitement and focused participation in the task.

Students providing and responding to peer feedback

In response to peer feedback, all students made some changes to their writing. Most students added more descriptive detail at the end of their writing about bugs. For example, Ron, whose drawing and written text about the scorpion was also used by Mickey, originally wrote that the scorpion could pinch people; he described its colour, and stated that the scorpion was strong and had a long tail. As a response to peer feedback, Ron selected one student's suggestion and elaborated on the scorpion's crab claws and how it poisons people (see Diagram 5 and 6).

Evidence of the resulting changes in students' writing is illustrated in the following three examples. Mickey has written over the students' additions in green pen to show the changes as a result of peer/partner response.

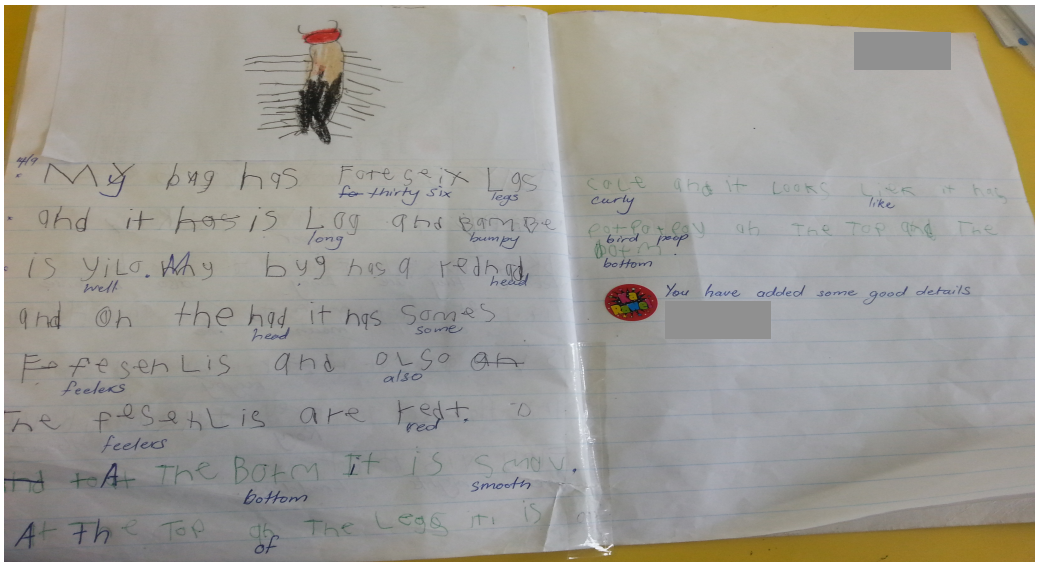

Diagram 4: Pam added on: 'And at the bottom it is smooth. At the top of the legs it is black'.

Diagram 5: Ron's sketched scorpion 'bug' and written description.

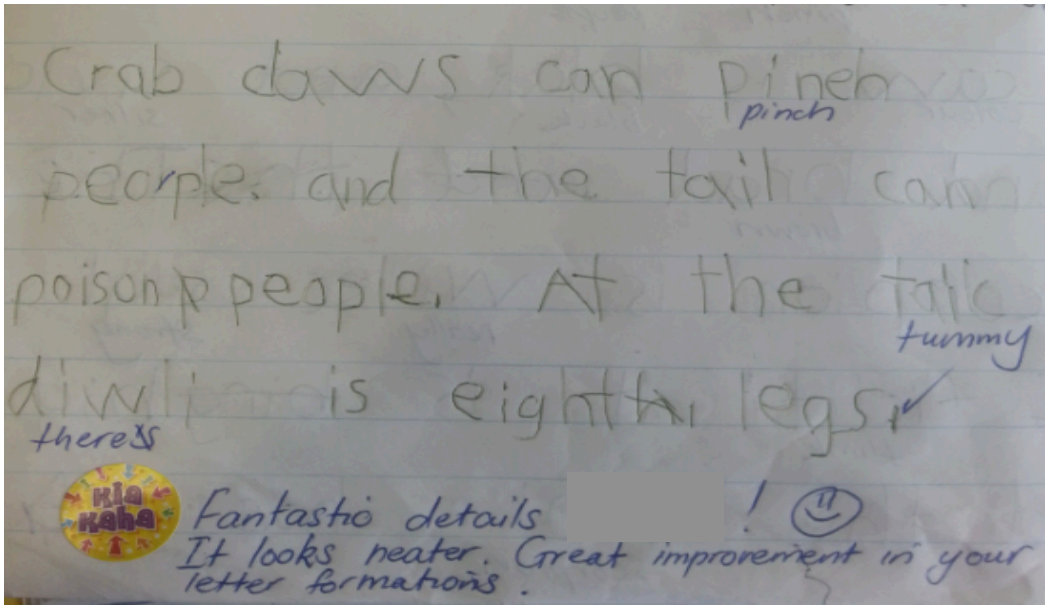

Diagram 6: Ron then added on, 'Crab claws can pinch people and the tail can poison people. At the tummy there is eight legs'.

Conclusion

In our Teacher Led Innovation Fund project, we were interested in determining if there could be handover of feedback through dialogic conversations? Specifically, we were interested in answering the following questions: Was there evidence of student engagement in writing? Could the students provide feedback about their peer's writing? Did students demonstrate an ability to evaluate and critique writing following modelling sessions? Could they generate options and suggest other details that could be included in the descriptive writing? Did the students listen to their partners' feedback? Did they add in more written detail that they hadn't already included?

We found that students in Mickey's class were enthusiastic writers. When given an interesting topic students enjoyed talking about and looking closely at their bugs. Students were keen to describe and write detailed information on what their bug looked like and what it might be able to do. Importantly, Mickey's modelling, thinking-out-loud demonstrating to the students how to respond to a text, evaluate the ideas and give feedback scaffolded students' writing and peer response which in turn extended student's writing.

The Perspex embedded bugs acted as a motivational prompt for the children's sketching and writing, and the physical prompt that enabled the students to provide feedback on each other's writing. This physical prompt allowed students to notice and compare the detail in the object with their partner's written description of the object. By evaluating, generating other options and offering each other suggestions for adding more detailed information the students enhanced each other's writing. The students were fully engaged, and demonstrated that they were able to provide peer response and specific feedback so that they could each revise and enhance their own writing.

The results of our project suggest that teachers need to promote and scaffold students' ability to collaborate, critique and help each other improve their writing. By handing over the learning, teachers can demonstrate and encourage children to listen carefully and suggest ways texts can be made even better.

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