



Perspectives on Practice

Help Me Out! Fostering Cohesion and Connection through Play(ful) Writing

Jimmy McLean

Fostering play(ful) writing in upper elementary classrooms can reestablish the cohesion and connection that are often missing across a school day for students.

In an ongoing quest to raise test scores, the energy of literacy teachers in the upper elementary grades has become directed more toward students' "mastery" of discrete literacy skills than toward developing holistic readers, writers, and thinkers. Ellis and Bond (2016) rightly observe that progressive thinkers in education "argue that by reducing ideas to component parts, certain intangibles are lost in the process" (p. 122).

As an upper elementary literacy teacher with experience in both departmentalized and self-contained settings, I agree, and I contend that two major intangible elements are lost when learning is segmented into detached skills and learners are isolated or divided into multiple classes or groups: cohesion and connection. By cohesion, I mean the sense that everything in a school day fits together and makes sense to the child. By connection, I mean the sense that children belong together and share a commitment to the community. When elementary-aged children are tossed about in a sea of subjects, programs, interventions, and mastery checks, they lose the cohesion that sustained, transdisciplinary inquiry and meaningful relationships bring about. When they are grouped and regrouped, pulled out and pushed in, students can lose the sense that they belong to any one community within the school.

For years, teachers and scholars have demonstrated that play(ful) writing is a powerful way that children build communities and

negotiate relationships in their schools and classrooms. Anderson (2002) analyzes how young writers mediate classroom relationships through curricular writing activities. Dyson (2013), Wohlwend (2009), and Yoon (2013, 2014) each highlight how fluidly dramatic play and social relationships become part of the writing curriculum as students respond to their teachers' invitations to write. A classic example is Dyson's retelling of "The Pine Cone Wars," where children draw on the events of a shared recess game in their formal classroom writing activities. As Yoon advises, children, by nature, will write and create beyond the reductive requests of a mandated curriculum (2013, 2014). Other scholars have built on these studies to argue that bridging play and writing can contribute to students' interest and confidence in curricular writing tasks (Brownell, 2021; Sanchez, 2024).

It is hard to imagine such a relationship between play and writing in the contemporary upper elementary literacy curriculum, though. Mandated literacy programs and formulaic writing assignments increasingly make up the formal, academic literacy experiences of elementary students, and creative or personal writing is swept to the side. The message is that fanciful, imaginative, or silly writing is unwelcome in the writing classroom. Rather than composing brilliant worlds and collaborative fiction during the writing block, students must save their creative energies for recess or, worse, beyond the school

walls entirely. Play(ful) writing is marginalized and devalued in the dominant skills-and-testing culture of schools, but it is not extinct. In my own fourth-grade classroom, I have observed that social, creative, play(ful) writing can foster the cohesion and connection that a broken-up school day suppresses. In sharing a few examples of this type of writing that emerged in my own classroom, I argue that other upper elementary literacy teachers can and should notice, celebrate, and encourage the writing that emerges outside of the formal curriculum.

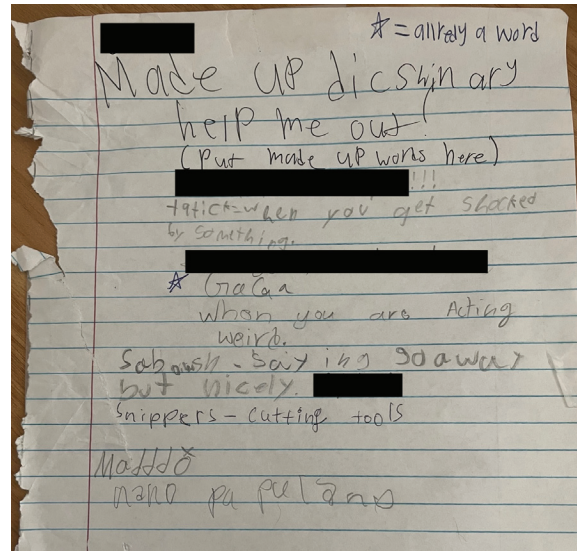
Fostering Cohesion and Connection in Our Learning Community

After teaching for five years in a departmentalized intermediate school and a brief hiatus from teaching for full-time graduate study, I returned to teaching, allured by the opportunity to teach in a self-contained classroom where the structure was such that I would loop with my students, serving as their teacher for both the fourth and fifth grades. A public K–8 school in a large city in Texas, the school draws students from the surrounding community, marked by racial, ethnic, class, linguistic, and religious diversity. The school follows a teacher-created interdisciplinary curriculum that was regularly in tension with (and often subordinate to) federal, state, and local mandates about what should be taught, how, and when. Therefore, well-coordinated, rich learning experiences regularly had to be rethought and adapted to comply (eventually, the state would appoint a reform-minded superintendent to manage the district, pulverizing much of what was left of the rich curriculum). Even so, the school maintained a strong literacy learning culture. Students entered fourth grade with an awareness of (even if not always an interest in) the ways that reading and writing can enrich our lives and our learning community.

One example of my students' use of writing and play to build community was the "made-up dictionary" that appeared on the student bulletin board in our classroom midway through the year (Figure 1).

As students were playing during recess, playing Uno during snack time, playing in gym class, or just socializing during dismissal—really, at any time across the day—they found themselves

Figure 1. Collaboratively created "made-up dictionary" posted for classmates to contribute to.

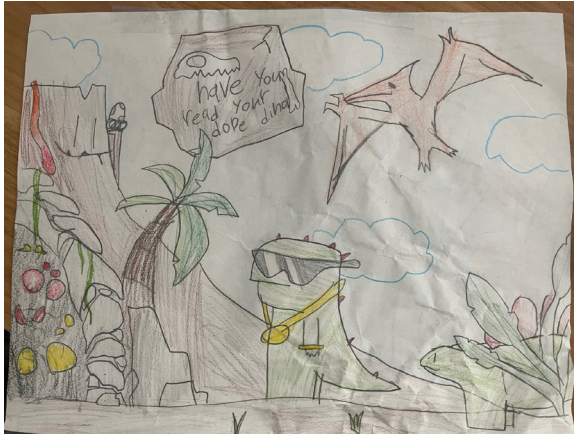


enjoying playing with language. As a way to formalize their shared love of language and to invite peers into this play, one student, Sydney (all names are pseudonyms), posted this dictionary in a public space, beckoning to her classmates, “Help me out!” Despite all the different directions students’ attention was pulled in throughout the day, this shared dictionary created an opportunity for connection.

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The cohesion of events across the school day and connection among children in the classroom community are evident in the entries in this dictionary. For example, “tatic = when you get shocked by something” emerged from a joyful moment of surprise electrostatic shock shared between students. “Saboush—saying go away but nicely” acknowledges the need for direct and kind communication when you spend all day with the same group of other students. The last two on the list, “maddo” and “nano papalano” (my approximations) don’t have definitions but hold meanings to students nonetheless. This simple artifact demonstrates that

Figure 2. Advertisement for Archer’s *Dope Dino* series.



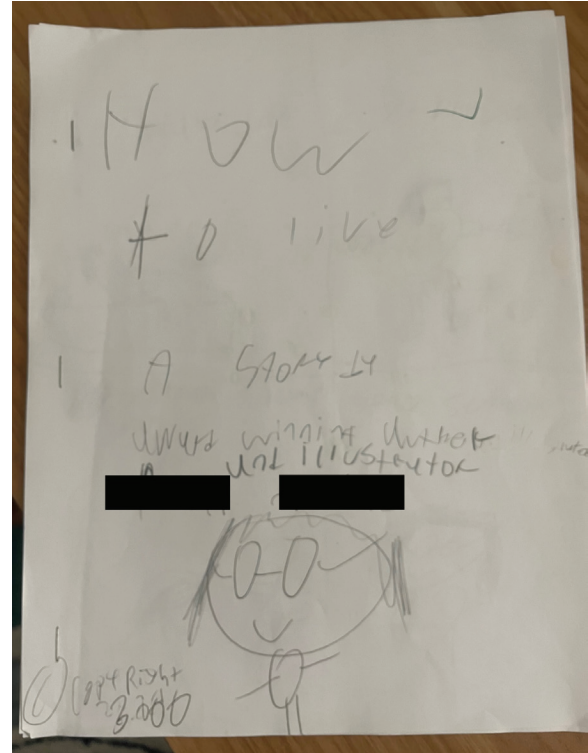
the young writers in my class used writing in playful ways that helped to tie them together.

One student, Archer, was a prolific writer with a reputation for churning out new issues of his two major comic book series, *Dope Dino* and *Captain of Noobs*, nearly every day. Though Archer could create all day, he found little meaning or purpose in formal writing tasks that were assigned to him. This generative and creative writer folded in the face of academic writing. He would meet minimum requirements for all school work, but his day was brought together by the self-selected composing he did at all times of the day. In addition, his humorous play(ful) writing developed an authentic literary community, with classmates regularly asking for updates on new issues of his works. He created and posted advertisements for the series (Figure 2).

One time, Archer even used our morning circle time to announce that he would be soliciting writing suggestions for future editions from the community. This was especially significant for Archer, who I was warned at the beginning of the school year had a reputation for being “difficult.” Archer’s playful, nonassignment writing created a sense of belonging in the classroom community and cohesion to his day.

By the end of the fourth-grade school year, Dane, who was what some might have referred to as a reluctant writer at the beginning of the year, had developed his own play-writing series. Dane’s was a how-to series including “How to Live” (Figure 3), “How to Train Your Nilgai” (a type of antelope indigenous to India but introduced to an area of

Figure 3. The cover of Dane’s text “How to Live.”



Texas one hundred years ago), “How to Ride a Nilgai,” and “Money Simplified.”

Dane’s production of these books was spurred by the success of Archer’s series. Not only that, but Archer and Dane (and soon others) started pitching crossover sequels, coauthored projects that blended their characters and styles. Because this type of play-writing was allowed to flourish, students like Dane found opportunities to participate in the classroom community in new and exciting ways. Dane’s books found a home in their own basket in our classroom library, and over the course of the year he began to identify as a writer. Dane turned to play-writing at all times of the day, including at times during other “subjects” after he had completed a task.

Encouraging Play(ful) Writing in Upper Elementary Classrooms

This play(ful) writing was supported by a school and classroom culture of play and literacy and my own commitments to authentic writing and community building. But it is important to note that all

of the writing described was separate from writing students were asked to do as part of the formal curriculum. In my classroom, writing emerged from authentic situations that students found themselves in, equipped with the material and rhetorical tools to play. As humans craving cohesion across their day and connection among their classmates, my students wrote as part of their play.

Teachers who are interested in promoting and encouraging play(ful) writing in their upper elementary classrooms can look for opportunities to give students the tools and time to engage in noncurricular writing. For example, the “made-up dictionary” may not have emerged in my classroom if I had not designated a bulletin board by the classroom door as a space for students to post anything they wanted. I have also found it important to make composing tools (pens, markers, construction paper, coloring utensils) available to students at all times and not as a reward or incentive. Finally, I encourage teachers who value play(ful) writing not to discredit nonassignment writing, especially when it appears during unsanctioned times. Instead of shaming the writer, validate their writing while encouraging them to honor their commitments to their community and their own learning—yes, this even applies to note-passing!

Where reductive literacy curricula are increasingly focused on developing student writing in only one or two genres in order to receive a passing score from a computer grader, supporting playful and creative writing on the margins and in the gaps during the school day can help to build community and

give deeper meaning to students’ days. All it takes is to simply notice, lift up, and encourage the crafty and clever play(ful) writing that young writers are always ready to create.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink

In this series of lessons, students view and then think critically about selected videos. Students will discover how text and images can work together to convey information. Once they are comfortable with the ways in which images and words can support and enhance each other, they will apply what they’ve learned by writing a piece and turning that writing into captions for a video to be shared with others. View more at <https://bit.ly/4uaJzmW>

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