Tuesday, 30 January 2007

"Come Together, Right Now"*:
A brief reflective essay examining the connections between reading and writing

Thomas Mann, in his eloquent novella *Death in Venice*, says that "nothing gladdens a writer more than a thought that can become pure feeling and a feeling that can become pure thought" (2004). He is praising that beautiful connection between the written work and the reader, which can only be described as a *pure* understanding. Within the analogy the author undertakes the complicated task of transcribing his or her feelings into written thoughts. The reader of that work then decodes the written thoughts into new feelings; personally relevant ones.

Mann's somewhat aloof adage is easily transposed into an educational principle known as the "reading & writing connection." In *Teaching for Comprehending and Fluency*, authors Irene C. Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell describe the "relationship between reading and writing" as being "reciprocal" (2006). That reciprocity simply means that reading and writing are interrelated inasmuch as they are effectively used in conjunction with one another. A writer takes his or her thoughts—"invisible information"—and writes them down as words on a page—"visible information" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). The reader then scans over the written words—"visible information"—and processes them as thoughts—"invisible information." In that way, both readers and writers utilize the same bodies of information, as well as the same processes.

The question then isn't whether or not reading and writing are connected, but how to foster that relationship within a classroom setting. If you really want to be dull and boring about it, book reports can be assigned. Students can choose a novel from a pre-seleted list, go to the library, check the book out, read it, and then write a synopsis and response. While that is an *acceptable* method of connecting the two disciplines in the classroom, it is surely not a *creative* one, nor does it promote critical thinking.

I know you might be thinking "but book reports are a staple of American education!" That's only partially true. They *have been* a staple of education, but that doesn't mean they *still* need to

be. There are plenty of other methods that can be used in place of the traditional book report—methods that will be equally (if not more) enlightening to students, and will allow them to express themselves in more creative ways.

According to Fountas and Pinnell, these types of activities can be separated into three different categories of instruction; "whole-group," "small group," and "individualized" (2006). Simply utilizing one of these methodologies within the classroom may prove to be quite mundane and repetitive. However, when all three are intertwined and used effectively, the instructional variance has the potential to engage young readers and writers in ways that traditional methods can't (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006).

Within each of the three categories of instruction are several different activities. Teachers have used storytelling—in which the teacher reads a tale aloud to students—as a type of whole-group instruction for years. Storytelling allows students to spend less time processing written text, giving them more time to create mental images instead (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). While storytelling has been used in the classroom for decades, there are many *other* methods of whole-group teaching that also engage students, but in different ways. To capture the interests of the more kinesthetic students, "process drama" can be used. In process drama, the students "assume the roles of characters" from the story and act out the tale with one another (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). This type of active participation promotes critical thinking skills such as empathetic perspective-taking, imagination, and working with classmates as a part of a larger group.

For small group instruction, two prominently effective activities are guided reading and book clubs. In guiding reading, around four to eight children with "similar [reading] needs" are clustered together in order to read and discuss books that are "on their level" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). These children, being at approximately the same level, can help one another explore and

investigate new ideas relating to the text. Book clubs, unlike guided reading, cluster children of varying abilities. All of the children—no matter the reading level—benefit from book clubs. More experienced readers hone their communication skills by conveying their ideas on a level that the other children can understand (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). Less experienced readers receive help from the more advanced readers with not only text comprehension, but also intra-literary connections.

For individualized instruction, the most common exercise is independent reading. As the name implies, students read various books on their own and with minimal assistance from the teacher. To expand the exercise, however, you (as the teacher) can have them respond to the texts either orally or through writing (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006).

All of these activities foment connections between reading and other academic skills. While they may not all *directly* develop the reading and writing connection, they do so indirectly by honing critical thinking skills. For example, when a child is involved in process drama, he or she has read a text and is mentally writing his or her lines for the play. While the child isn't writing the lines down on paper, he or she is still using imagination to communicate thoughts.

REFERENCES:

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* Title taken from the song *Come Together* by the Beatles on their album, *Abbey Road* (1969).