Children discover the power of the press

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Introduction
Anybody who has been asked to write something knows how difficult this task can be. Children can find it difficult too, especially if they have learning difficulties. Furthermore, the task is often painful and more frustrating if these children do not understand why they are doing it. But it is a different matter if children are motivated and have a purpose, and a goal, for what they’re doing.

In this paper I describe and discuss a curriculum project in which a group of special needs children learned about writing by producing a newspaper. Because they wanted to produce their own newspaper, they quickly realised the need for learning to write.

The underlying aim of this newspaper project was to develop the children’s writing abilities. The project also aimed to encourage the children to learn about newspapers and from newspapers and to extend their knowledge through the use of electronic mail communication with children in another State.

This aim was not achieved through formal teaching methods. Instead, the children wrote and worked in a simulation of an adult writing world. They created their own newspaper office in the classroom with its editor’s desk, research areas, photography and layout departments. They found out real information and wrote for a real audience, becoming immersed in this simulated world because it was their own.

Once a week the students gathered in this newsroom and worked to publish their own newspaper, The D’Alton Advertiser. Using computers, a newspaper simulation software package and other learning materials, the students and I carried out all the functions of a newspaper office. They prepared their own stories on word processors, edited them, selected suitable photographs, designed advertisements and laid out the pages.

What happened in the classroom enabled each child to learn many essential writing skills. But, more important, it provided a clear purpose to learning for these children.

Background information
The ages of the children working in the newsroom office varied from eight years to twelve years, and one severely physically handicapped child was sixteen years old. The project took place on Fridays, when the children’s usual class teacher taught physical education lessons with other children in the school. A teacher aide also worked in the classroom each Friday morning.

The children in the group had a mixture of abilities. They were all physically handicapped in some way and most had some intellectual disability. Three of the children were unable to speak or write legibly. The language of three other children was either disordered or delayed. Others needed concrete explanations in order to understand information. Later in the year, a boy who had sustained head injuries from a car accident joined the group. The children did not spell, read or write well.

They were not familiar with newspapers. Some of them had seen one in their home but most of them had not opened one.

The Project
The project was designed to involve other curriculum subjects such as maths, art, music and drama. Figure 1 shows the intended stages of the project for the year. However, only the first two stages of this were covered as the children became more involved in each stage than I had expected.
STAGES OF THE NEWSPAPER PROJECT

To initiate the project and to introduce the concept of what a newspaper is, the children spent some weeks exploring Hobart’s local newspaper *The Mercury*. They examined the banner of *The Mercury* and the importance of various features. They compared this banner with those of other newspapers such as *The Australian* and *The Sun* and a very old edition of *The Mercury*. Then they designed a banner of their own using a graphics package.

Through simple exploration activities they discovered that a newspaper contains photographs, reports, advertisements and notices and they explored the meaning of each of these. They learned about different forms of writing and they began to see how to distinguish between a factual report and a story of fiction. Some of the children began to learn to use a word processor to write reports and stories themselves.

They explored the different types of advertisements in the newspaper and discussed why advertisements are necessary. In pairs, they worked with a graphics package to design their own advertisements. They wondered, and talked about, why the ‘advertisement’ columns were higher than the ‘reports’ columns.

By the fourth week of the project the children were highly motivated and showing an interest in how newspapers are made. A trip to *The Mercury* answered many of their questions. They began to understand how a newspaper office works, saw the print room with its huge print rollers, listened to explanations of how the office works and realised that a newspaper production office requires editors, reporters, photographers and layout people. And so, the children began to learn about the roles of these people in working together to produce a newspaper.

At school, the children learned and practised some of the interviewing and reporting skills that reporters use in their work. Specifically, they thought about relevant questions to ask when interviewing. Knowing what not to ask was also important. They interviewed the School Principal, their friends and their mums and dads. A group of three children visited a local supermarket to interview the manager. The children had read about the manager’s attempt to have weekend shop trading hours changed and were excited, even though the background information was difficult to understand.

The children used word processors to write the reports about the people they had interviewed and, with my help, began to see how to edit their work. They learned to look at their writing, to think about it, and to use the cursor keys and the delete key to make changes.

To understand the work of an editor, three children interviewed Sue Dyson, who was the editor of *Classroom Computing*. She talked about her role and explained how she edits full-stops and capital letters. The children were fascinated as they helped Sue edit a story about Podd, one of their favourite computer software characters.

**Newspaper production in the classroom**

The children now had sufficient knowledge about newspapers to begin producing their own. With some knowledge of how a newspaper is produced, the children and I turned the classroom into a newsroom office by preparing the areas needed by an editor, reporters, photographers and the layout people. Large signs identified each area and the children gathered together the necessary equipment for the various roles. They added paper, pens, a range of dictionaries and two computers to the scene. As a group they decided to call their newspaper *The D’Alton Advertiser*.

Throughout this time, various learning needs and abilities of the children became clear. Hence it was a simple matter for the children to adopt certain major roles and responsibilities which would assist them to learn more effectively. For example, Jan showed some leadership qualities. Unfortunately, she was not able to exhibit these qualities easily because of her...
We explore aspects of child-centered learning. Many of the children noticed physical disabilities and her impaired speech. Jan became the editor. Her role of reading, comprehending, thinking and editing, as well as managing other people responsibly, would extend her considerably. It would also improve her self-esteem and increase her sense of worth.

For several other children the need to develop writing skills and abilities was particularly important, so these children took on the reporter’s roles. One child with specific language difficulties had become interested in the way in which the newspaper reported the weather information each day. She became the weather reporter and some of her learning tasks included the development of adjective-noun language structures, such as ‘a fine day’ or ‘a rainy day’. Similarly, other children undertook roles according to their needs and abilities. Each child had a different major responsibility, but each was also involved in many other aspects of newspaper production throughout the year.

All this time, the children were interested and actively involved in their work. Up until now I had initiated the direction of most of this. From this point however, the learning situation in the classroom began to change. It became truly child-centred. The children had become extremely motivated and enthusiastic. But more than that, they had discovered a purpose. Their purpose was to produce their own newspaper and they were eager to write in order to do this.

The D’Alton Advertiser
The classroom now became more like a busy beehive. Intrinsically motivated and with a clear purpose in mind, the children worked well to achieve their goals. They knew what they needed to do and they set themselves to work without being prompted.

Sometimes the children wrote individual reports. Sometimes, pairs of children or the whole class worked together to write and edit the report. Some used the word processors while others worked with pen and paper. Some children used the newsroom simulation on the computer for adding photographs to their reports, or for designing weather reports.

All the features for the newspaper ended up on the editor’s desk for final editing. This was Jan’s job and she did it enthusiastically and responsibly. I’m sure the favourite aspect of her job was sending work back to be corrected! When the children were satisfied with their work they prepared the final copy of their newspaper using the newsroom simulation package.

Various strengths and weaknesses became evident as the children researched and queried, interviewed and wrote. I worked with children to ensure that they understood various aspects of their work. Sometimes the whole class stopped to explore a learning task together. An example of this is when we explored more about fullstops.

We communicated regularly with the children at Toowoomba Prep School in Queensland via electronic mail. We read about what our friends were doing and asked questions about Toowoomba. We answered their questions and sent mail about what we were doing. We swapped newspapers and learned more about Toowoomba in this way.

The children were responsible for the financial aspects of their work as well. Together they decided on a price for their newspapers: they sold them to their friends, to teachers and therapists and to relatives for 5 cents a copy. They tallied and graphed the sales of each edition of their newspaper. The children had to solve many mathematical problems which arose, often related to the sales. Some were difficult but the children were keen and the difficulties of the problems did not worry them because of their involvement and commitment.

The children completed three editions of their newspaper during the year. Their skills and abilities developed as they worked to produce each one. Descriptions of highlights and particular aspects of the children’s work with each edition follow.

Edition 1
The first edition of The D’Alton Advertiser was a long time in production. You will realise from what I have described already that the children needed to understand many important concepts, such as “what is a newspaper”, before they could actually produce one of their own. But as they learned, and worked, and produced their own examples of reports, interviews, advertisements, and other newspaper items, they had, in effect, been preparing a collection of items for the first edition of their newspaper.

The first newspaper showed the knowledge they had gained. For example, their banner showed the name, cost, and number of their newspaper. It showed a clever logo which one of the children designed the city where their newspaper was produced. This edition also included the features that the children discovered to be an integral part of a newspaper.

This edition also indicates some skills the children acquired. Many of the reports are the results of interviews the children prepared and conducted. The children thought carefully about questions to ask, and put a lot of effort into translating these into reports. Other reports, such as Luchtime Accident and Robert Trimbole dies, concerned events or incidents that the children noticed and wanted to write about.

Edition 2
The major concern of this edition was to learn to write concisely and clearly. The children needed to learn to assess the amount of information a reader requires. It was at this time that the electronic mail communication with the children at Toowoomba Prep School began. These children were also producing newspapers. The electronic mail communication
David is eight.  
He lives in Hobart.  
He is nice.  
He has two sisters.  
He likes to ride his bike.

From this exercise they realised how difficult it was to draw the boy when the report was not clear about the boy’s size, shape or features. They saw that they had difficulty drawing a background in their picture (other than a bike) as the report said little about the boy’s characteristics or personality. We examined other reports and stories about people from books and from these they gained ideas about the importance of the use of language in writing.

Their next task was to write reports about themselves with a particular reader in mind. The electronic mail link with the children in Toowoomba helped them to do this.

Knowing that their friends in Toowoomba could not see them helped the children significantly with their writing. It helped them to understand that they needed to write clearly for their readers. As they wrote they asked, ‘What information will my friend in Queensland need to be able to draw me just like I am?’; ‘What information is important?’ and ‘What information will not help the Toowoomba children?’.

While the children prepared these reports they also became more interested in exploring how to edit. Some children were writing with no punctuation at all. Others were attempting to use full-stops and capital letters after their interviews with Sue Dyson and Jeff Bailey (another editor who had recently visited the school). One day, while editing her report, one of the children inquired ‘How do I know when to put a full-stop?’ To help them understand about full-stops I read her report to the others as she had written it. The children discussed why I was gasping for breath at the end! Eventually they realised that a reader needs to take a pause when reading. They understood why full-stops are important. They learned how to listen to themselves as they read. They began to see how the pauses in their voices help them to find appropriate places for the full-stops. This was exciting to me because it was one of my objectives and it had come about in the way I had intended; that is, the children realised for themselves that they needed to know about full-stops.

The children worked more purposefully towards the production of the second edition. Their goals were clear, and they knew what they needed to do to achieve them. This edition took less time to produce. When it was finished, the children sent a mail message to Toowoomba to let the children there know that several copies of their newspaper were on their way to them.

The second edition showed an improvement in style, clarity and ability to punctuate. More sentences begin with capital letters and the children used full stops more consistently. One child had decided to include a Cooking section after seeing one in the paper at home. Most importantly, the children had learned what it means to write with the readers in mind.

**Edition 3**

The third edition focussed on writing reports in an interesting way for others. We chose the Tasman Bridge collapse of 1975 as the topic to research and write about. The Tasman Bridge featured for two reasons; its importance as a Hobart landmark and its relevance to the children, most of whom travelled over it regularly.

The children’s interest in this topic developed through excursions, interviews and exploration of old newspapers. At the City Museum they examined a model of the bridge showing the extent of the disaster. They saw the model of the huge ship which ran into the bridge, lying on the bottom of the river, and they saw the collapsed bridge section and pylons. They asked the museum education officer questions and they took notes just as reporters would.

At school they interviewed an invited speaker who had heard the commotion on the night of this disaster. They listened, fascinated, as she described what she had heard. Later, they explored old newspapers written at the time of the disaster. They also learned about the implications of the disaster for the people of Hobart. Gradually they collected information for their reports.

While they were researching with old copies of *The Mercury*, the children also realised the power of a headline in attracting the reader’s attention. They examined how other reporters had used punchy headlines. They realised that they could do this too - they learned to summarise their reports and to think of a headline which would attract their readers’ eyes.

Again with this edition, the children had a clear purpose and they wrote their reports for the Queensland children. This time they also learned to ask as they wrote, ‘Will the children in Toowoomba be interested in my report, the way I am writing it?’

Their enthusiasm towards achieving their goals shows in the third completed edition. The children’s reports are interesting. They chose words carefully. Their headlines are punchy. They had written about many aspects of the Tasman Bridge disaster for their readers - the Toowoomba children. Furthermore, they had laid out the newspaper in an attractive way.

Their writing is also more fluent. It shows more content. The children used more interesting words, such as ‘shuffling’ and ‘dangling’. Their writing is clear and concise and their use of full-stops and capital letters is more consistent. This edition also shows more features of a newspaper. For example, there is a Letters to the Editor section. The children had received a written complaint from a Tasmanian reader about the lack of sport news. As a result of this they included a Letters to the Editor section and a Sport section.
Summary
Each edition of the newspaper showed evidence of the improvement in the children's writing abilities. They wrote more. They wrote more concisely. They wrote more fluently. They were able to punctuate more easily. They criticised their own work and they accepted criticism from each other and from the Editor. They wrote carefully and thoughtfully.

There were other benefits as well. As I had hoped, the children gained an understanding of the role of newspapers in passing on information to others. Their interest in the news in newspapers and other media such as radio and television has continued and they are often able to tell me more about various news items. One day this year when Meg was asked why she was so informed about current affairs, she replied, 'You made me interested in the news. It's so interesting. I wasn't interested until we did the newspaper project.' (Meg., October, 1988).

In working out the cost of the advertisements and even the cost of the newspapers themselves, their problem-solving abilities improved. It was interesting to watch them discussing their sales graphs and trying to work out what a quarter-page advertisement would cost.

The electronic mail communication with the Toowoomba children played an invaluable role in developing the children's writing abilities. It helped the children to realise that writing is just 'talking' on paper. It also gave the children an idea of life beyond their school and home environments. The children easily understood the concept of using the computer as a method of communication. This rapid and very efficient means of transmission gave them a deeper understanding of another part of their own country. With such close communication with children in another state they became very interested in things that were happening in Queensland. They asked often 'Let's look on the computer and see if there is a letter for us from Toowoomba.' or 'When can we go to Toowoomba?' Even now they find any news of Queensland meaningful.

My most important objective was for each child to realise a purpose for what he or she was learning. I wanted the children to be intrinsically motivated and involved in their learning. This happened. There was a gradual shift of responsibility in the classroom as it happened: the children showed more initiative. The diagram below indicates this.

At first, I had initiated activities to ensure that the children gained some knowledge about newspapers. They couldn't create their own newspaper unless they understood what a newspaper was! I had also helped the children to decide what topics to research at the beginning of each edition. I did this because I knew what goals I wanted them to discover and
achieve. Later, as their purpose became clearer, the children were able to make their own decisions. They also initiated many ideas. For example, they decided what should be included on many occasions and they analysed their work more carefully. They were eager to learn because they had a purpose in doing so. Often they asked to learn something they needed to know. They listened and they discussed. They inquired and they researched. They worked independently and they worked cooperatively.

The teacher's role in such a classroom is to create the situation which enables these things to happen and then to guide and assist the children to achieve their goals.

The children do the rest.

References


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