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## **8. Collaboration in Writing**

***Anne Jyrkiäinen<sup>1</sup> and Kirsi-Liisa Koskinen-Sinisalo***

### **Introduction**

This research sought to develop a pedagogical model for teaching literacy skills combined with collaborative learning. The study focused on the process of writing in groups at primary school level and was carried out in the Teacher Training School of University of Tampere during 2009–2010. A class teacher and a special education teacher designed the study together as teachers and researchers. Some teacher trainees on school placement also participated in this study.

In this article the theoretical backgrounds, research questions, data collection and the pedagogical model are presented. Designing a pedagogical model requires investigation of multiple cycles of design, pursuing development and enactment through collaboration with teachers and researchers (Design-Based Research Collective, 2003).

### **Theoretical Background**

This research builds on the socio-constructivist and socio-cultural theories of learning (Vygotsky 1978; Lave & Wenger, 1991). This study takes into account Vygotsky's theory that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the process of cognitive development. The approach of this study is socio-cultural in assignments, learning, identity and pedagogy.

Through a close analysis of Finnish pupils' literary skills, Finnish researchers Luukka *et al.* (2008) found that Finnish teenagers' media

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literacy practices in out-of-school contexts differ strongly from their media literacy practices at school. There are two different worlds in literacy practices, they say. One important question is what kind of pedagogical methods support teenagers' social needs and enhance their media skills? Hence, in the last report of mother tongue skills of Finnish teenagers, The Finnish National Board of Education (Lappalainen 2011, p. 12) discovered that Finnish pupils have some problems in writing, especially boys. Pupils need more varied kinds of practices and guidance in writing skills.

### *Sense of community*

According to research, an individual learns best and performs best in an atmosphere of trust and in cooperation with others (Himanen, 2007, p. 115). However, nowadays the lack of community and cooperation with others is considered a growing social problem. Therefore it is important to teach children the skills needed to live and work together cooperatively. Collaborative learning is a pedagogical method that helps pupils to learn these skills. Social participation requires skills such as the ability to ask questions, argue a point, justify opinions and draw conclusions. All of these elements were practised while writing together collaboratively.

### *Genre pedagogy*

During the last decade increasing attention has been given to genre pedagogy in teaching writing in Finnish schools. Genre pedagogy (Christie & Martin 2005; Martin 1997) is based on the idea of familiarising pupils to different kinds of texts. At school it means teaching students to analyse, compare and test different kinds of texts in different kinds of contexts. Learning different genres is a goal-oriented social process (Luukka 2004). Martin (1997, p. 126) summarises it as "guidance through interaction in the context of shared experience". In this study genre pedagogy is the basis of the collaborative writing model.

### **Assessment**

Assessment is an essential part of learning. *Assessment of learning* intends to measure the outcomes of learning. This is the traditional way to measure what has been learned. *Assessment for learning* focuses on pupils' working and its purpose is to improve learning (Shepard, 2002, p. 244). According to Brownlie (2008) assessment for learning includes intentions, criteria, descriptive feedback, questions, self and peer assessment and ownership. *Assessment as learning* means students reflecting on their own learning and making adjustments. This is a metacognitive process.

In this study all three different dimensions of assessment are seen as important but the study is mainly focused on assessment for learning and assessment as learning. One objective of this study is to find functional ways to improve children's writing and teamwork skills using meaningful assessment strategies.

### **Research Questions**

In this study the research questions were as follows:

1. What kind of a pedagogical model supports a pupil to become an active participant in a writing group at school?
2. What kind of a pedagogical model supports a pupil to learn concepts of language and to use different kinds of texts?

### **Research Environment and Participants**

The study was carried out in the Teacher Training School of University of Tampere. The collaborative writing model was developed at the primary level with seventeen pupils (nine females, eight males) during the year 2009–2010. At the beginning the pupils were eight years old. The collaborative writing session (90 minutes) was organised once a week. During collaborative writing sessions the pupils worked in small heterogeneous groups, three or four pupils together. The class teacher and

the special education teacher worked in the class as both teachers and researchers.

There were seven teacher trainees (five females, two males) practising in the class during the study period. The teacher trainees organised some of the collaborative writing lessons working in pairs. The class teacher and the special education teacher guided the students in advance and participated as researchers during the collaborative writing lessons.

### **Methods**

The study adopted a design-based research (DBR) methodology. Design-based research deals with real world situations. It is based on continuous cycles of design, enactment, analysis and redesign (Brown, 1992; Design-Based Research Collective, 2003). In this DBR, the first central goals of designing a new pedagogical model were set in a real world situation in the 2nd class by the researchers. Some of the key theories of collaboration, genre pedagogy and assessment were studied before the preliminary pedagogical model was designed. Subsequently the model was tested in the classroom.

This research also included elements of action research. As teachers and researchers it was possible to guide the teacher trainees in authentic settings and refine collective understanding of the learning issues involved (Design-Based Research Collective, 2003).

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data was collected using multiple methods. The data consists of pupils' texts and recorded group discussions, interviews with the pupils, questionnaires and reports from the teacher trainees and the observations of the researchers. The objective of the analysis was to gain an overall picture of a functional writing model that contains the elements of collaborative learning and genre pedagogy. In this research, the pupils' writing, interviews, trainees' questionnaires and reports and researchers' observations were analysed.

Analysis was conducted by using the method of content analysis. First, the pupils' writings were analysed in order to clarify how pupils had understood the criteria of the genre. Secondly, the transcriptions of recorded group discussions and interviews, the questionnaires, reports and observations were analysed. Thirdly, after an overall picture of experiences was developed, the steps of the collaborative writing model were formulated. Finally, the practitioners and the researchers tested the preliminary model of collaborative writing.

## **Results**

The results of this study are the eight steps that form the pedagogical model for collaborative writing. The steps are presented with some practical examples, which were implemented during the learning sessions, when the topic of writing an animal tale was studied. During the writing sessions the two teachers co-operated in the classroom.

### *1. Orientation*

The purpose of orientation is to motivate pupils to work with a certain literacy genre. It is important, that pupils know what they are studying and where this kind of knowledge is needed. The starting point can be for example an interesting extract from a poem, an interesting question, a problem to solve, a picture or a short text sample from a newspaper, internet or a book.

*When we studied old Finnish animal tales, we began by talking about fairy tales that the children were familiar with.*

### *2. Studying genre*

The texts are studied and analysed together. The structure of the text will become familiar by reading and discussing. The pupils are encouraged to ask questions and to present their own opinions.

*Each group received an animal tale to read. After this, each group told to the others about the plot of their own tale. We talked together about the typical elements of the old Finnish animal tales: For example that the animals behave and talk like people, the animals are Finnish wild*

*animals like a bear, a wolf, a fox or a hare. At the end of the tale there is always a moral such as “intelligence is more important than strength” or “the good wins the evil”.*

### *3. Assignment*

Pupils are given the writing task. In other words, teachers outline what the pupils are expected to write.

In addition, teachers model how to make good questions, use arguments, ask for clarification, share opinions with each other and help group members with their ideas.

*We asked the pupils to plan a typical animal tale with animals behaving like humans and with a moral at the end of the tale. We emphasised that the animals have to speak in the text. We modelled the planning situation by thinking aloud what the typical animals in these kinds of tales are. Then we talked about how to write a dialogue and we wrote some examples on the blackboard. We made a short plan for the plot of our tale. We modelled how to discuss and how to share opinions with each other or how to argue.*

### *4. Clarifying the criteria*

The pupils have a right to know what is expected from them. Therefore, the objects will be clarified carefully in advance. Three or four criteria are given at a time.

*We gave four characteristics of a good animal tale.*

- i. Animals behave like people.*
- ii. Dialogues are written correctly.*
- iii. There is a moral at the end of the story.*
- iv. Each group member takes part in the planning of the content.*

### *5. Writing in groups*

The pupils write in heterogeneous groups (3–4 pupils). This means that the members of the groups are at different levels of writing ability. The pupils decide together what to write but each member of the group writes the same text individually. It is important that they learn to

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discuss, give arguments and to make good questions, but it is as important, that they gain lots of writing practice.

*The teachers helped pupils with spelling and if needed, how to develop their writing together. The pupils were encouraged to help each other.*

### *6. Rewriting*

Rewriting the text can mean modifying content or correcting the spelling. Careful reading and comparing the writing in relation to the criteria is an important step in editing the text. At this stage, group members help each other and they discuss together what to do. The feedback from the other groups is very valuable. Of course, the groups can also get help from the teachers.

*The groups were reading each other's texts and giving feedback about them. After that every group made their final changes.*

### *7. Displaying*

The pupils are asked to share the text with others. After that, the whole class talks about the texts and everyone can learn new things. Sometimes the texts are published, for example on a website, on a school wall or pupils give the text to their parents.

*Every group reads their own animal tale aloud.*

### *8. Assessment*

During the whole working time pupils receive descriptive feedback from teachers and their group members. This is the most important form of assessment, because it allows pupils to work on, to correct and to edit the text. The texts are evaluated in relation to the criteria by pupils and teachers together at the end of the collaborative writing lessons.

*After listening to the tale, we talked about it and we compared it to the objectives. The final point was to talk about the group work: What was challenging to do? What was it like to work together? What was learned about team work, about writing and about traditional Finnish animal tales?*



## Conclusion

In this article a pedagogical model of collaborative writing has been introduced. The results indicate eight steps to collaborative writing: orientation, studying genre, assignment/modelling, clarifying the criteria, writing in groups, rewriting the text, displaying and assessment.

The results suggest that pupils found writing in groups more meaningful than writing individually. They get ideas and support from each other.

It seems that the teacher trainees found modelling very challenging and cooperation useful between the pupils and teachers. Different kinds of co-operation skills are needed in school context at every level.

In summary, a collaborative writing model is worth exploring. However further studies are needed to capture a more specific understanding of the collaborative writing model, especially how the development of pupils' identity as writers can be supported. In the future our goal is to develop the role of assessment as an important part of collaborative writing.

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