

Chapter One

Creating Authentic Literacy Activities for Young Readers and Writers

This Handbook offers teachers of kindergarten through grade 3 a rich resource for creating authentic literacy activities for their classrooms. Authentic literacy activities are significantly related to increased reading and writing achievement, according to research. This Handbook pulls together for the first time for K-3 teachers a succinct definition of authenticity, together with concrete strategies, suggestions, and examples for how to design their own authentic literacy activities. What make this resource even more valuable are the real-life accounts of teachers who describe for others their first attempts at incorporating authentic literacy into their existing literacy instruction. These descriptions offer concrete models for those who are motivated to begin to include more authentic literacy activities in their classrooms.

Authentic Literacy Instruction

Authentic literacy is the reading and writing of real-life texts for real-life purposes in the literacy learning classroom. When children are involved in authentic literacy activity in school, they are reading or writing texts that people outside of school read and write such as recipes, greeting cards, stories, and poems. Furthermore, they are reading recipes for the purpose of preparing a food dish, writing greeting cards to send to friends or family, or reading stories to enjoy and discuss with friends. They are reading and writing real-life texts for real-life purposes in the literacy learning classroom.

The term *authentic literacy* must always be paired with the term *instruction*. This is because the definition of *authentic literacy* only applies to the type of reading and writing that occurs within classrooms and within instruction that is ultimately focused on helping young

children learn to read and write. Literacy practice that occurs outside of the learning/teaching to read and write context is always authentic – that is *real*, and, thus, it does not make sense to refer to it as *authentic*.

This means that there is no such thing as *inauthentic literacy* or instruction. We call the kinds of reading and writing that children do in school that is not authentic, by our definition, *school-only*. When children are involved in school-only literacy activities, they are reading and writing texts that are specifically designed to help children *learn* to read and write. These are texts like leveled readers, flashcards, phonics charts, spelling lists, and comprehension questions and answers. Further, they are reading leveled readers to learn and practice skills like decoding, comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency. Or, they are writing spelling words to learn how to spell new words. They are reading and writing literacy instructional texts for purposes of learning to read and write and to develop more advanced reading and writing abilities. These are school-only literacy activities, engaged in for the purpose of literacy learning.

How is Authentic Literacy Different from Whole Language?

The type of authentic literacy activity that is described in this Handbook differs from most descriptions of Whole Language instruction in that it includes the explicit and systematic teaching of skills and strategies for beginning reading and writing. While some versions of whole language include embedded skill teaching, others rely on students inferring the regularities and structures of written language through wide and meaningful reading and writing. I believe that this approach can delay, and in some cases divert, children's development as independent and effective readers and writers. Thus, in this handbook, teachers are encouraged to incorporate authentic reading and writing into skill instruction, and do this in whichever way they are

comfortable and that works within their mandated curricula. This may involve embedded skill instruction, side-by-side skill instruction, or any combination of these.

How Does This Differ from Balanced Literacy Instruction?

The definition of *authentic literacy* in existing descriptions of balanced literacy instruction is somewhat different from the one used in this handbook. Authentic reading in many classrooms is almost exclusively related to reading children's literature. And authentic writing is most often enacted in different types of Writer's Workshop. Children's literature does involve real-life texts but they are not the *only* real-life texts that exist in people's lives. This handbook expands the range of real-life texts beyond, but including, children's literature and personal writing. In addition, the authentic literacy activity that is promoted in this handbook carefully specifies the inclusion of real-life purposes for reading and writing these real-life texts. This is important because the type of authenticity that has proven to be significantly related to learners' growth in literacy abilities includes the connections between real-life texts and real-life purposes for reading and writing.

Authentic Literacy is Research-Based

When learners are engaged in reading and writing real-life texts for real-life reasons, they are always highly motivated and engaged. They 'come alive,' in the words of many teachers. This, alone, can be considered reason enough to include authentic literacy activity in the classroom. However, when kids write thank you notes to school visitors, or read information books to explore their interests in bugs or storms, they are not only 'having fun.' Several large research studies have documented a real relationship between the frequency between engagement in authentic reading and writing and achievement in reading and writing. Scores

increase on standardized reading and writing assessment.

Adult learners report increased frequency of reading and writing in their everyday lives and report that they read and write more advanced types of texts.

The TEXT study, directed by Nell K. Duke and me, involved 26 second and third grade teachers and their

students. As part of this study, all of the teachers worked with us to make authentic reading and writing an integral part of their science instruction. They used the definition I use here: Reading and writing real-life texts for real-life purposes in the classroom. In the case of the TEXT study, which focused on second and third grade science learning, this translated into reading and writing real-life science information texts like books on snakes, the weather, or force and motion. Real-life science texts also included brochures that one could find at a science museum or center, procedures for science experiments, and bookmarks that included 'science facts.'

The students were assessed three times a year for two years on reading comprehension of these types of science texts and on their ability to write/compose these types of science texts. At the end of the two years of the study, the children who had read and written more real-life texts for real-life purposes scored higher on these assessments than those who had not. For each increase in the frequency of authentic literacy in these classrooms, there was a corresponding increase in literacy achievement.

This is pretty impressive evidence that, in addition to the motivating element of authentic literacy, children appear to improve their reading and writing abilities more when they engage

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with authentic reading and writing in school. Teachers can begin to conclude that adding authentic literacy to their literacy instruction is both fun *and* instructional for their children.¹

Elements of an Authentic Literacy Lesson

There are four things to consider, or keep in mind, when planning and carrying out an authentic literacy activity, or lesson, in the classroom: (1) Learning the literacy practices in the lives of your students; (2) Creating the necessary authentic contexts for literacy activity in your classroom; (3) Selecting both real-life texts for your students to read and write as well as real-life purposes for the reading and writing of these texts; and (4) the explicit teaching of skills and strategies as well as formative assessment of how your students are learning them.

Each one of these is explained in depth in Chapters 2 – 5 of this handbook. Further, you will find concrete suggestions and ideas for each of the elements in the following chapters. These are meant both to exemplify the concept under discussion as well as to get you started in thinking about how each of the elements could take shape in your own classroom with your students.

A Note about the Co-Authors

Interspersed throughout this handbook are accounts from practicing teachers of authentic literacy activities that they have brought into their classrooms. These stories will help you to picture what authentic reading and writing looks like in a variety of instructional contexts. They will also spur your own ideas about the real-life texts and purposes that you can build literacy lessons around in your own classrooms. These teacher stories are meant to serve as models of how teachers can begin to think about the design of authentic literacy activities. They are not meant to be taken as recipes or lesson plans.

Creating Authentic Literacy Activities K-3

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One outstanding quality of the model lessons is that they were designed and tried out in classrooms of incredible diversity. Each community and school represented in the lessons include families who speak many different languages and come from countries around the world. English is the second, third, or fourth language for the majority of the students taught by the teacher authors in this handbook. Authentic literacy lessons proved just as engaging and valuable for young English-language learners as it did for native-language learners in the research, described above. The literacy practices in the homes and communities reflected this diversity. In the process of designing the lessons the teachers all gained a deeper respect and knowledge of the lives of their students who were often from different cultures and backgrounds from their own.

¹ You can read more about the TEXT study in the following articles: Purcell-Gates, V., Duke, N.K., & Martineau, J. (2007). Learning to read and write genre-specific text: Roles of authentic experience and explicit teaching. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 42, 8-45. Duke, N.K., Purcell-Gates, V., Hall, L.A., & Tower, C. (2006). Authentic literacy activities for developing comprehension and writing. *The Reading Teacher*, 60, 344-355.

For those interested in how authentic literacy instruction impacted the literacy use of adult literacy learners, see: Purcell-Gates, V., Degener, S., Erickson, E., & Soler, M. (2002). Impact of authentic literacy instruction on adult literacy practices. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 37, 70-92.