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Teachable Moments: Linking Assessment and Teaching in Talk around Writing

Every day in classrooms, barely noticeable, yet hugely powerful interactions take place in what we have come to know as the “teachable moment.” Here we get inside those moments to understand how assessment and teaching mesh to produce learning.

WRITING IN YEAR ONE IN ELEANOR’S CLASSROOM

Welcome to Eleanor’s Year One/Two classroom in Auckland, New Zealand. In the United States, the young writers in her classroom would be 1st and 2nd graders. Eleanor is participating in a research study focused on understanding effective writing practices for academically diverse learners in New Zealand primary schools. She is one of nine teachers in five Auckland schools recommended by district advisors and school administrators as “exemplary” teachers of writing. In the course of this research, I (Kathryn) spend around 4–6 weeks in each classroom trying to understand the experiences of writers of all shapes and sizes: some who excel, some who struggle, and many more in between. I observe instructional routines closely, I talk with children, and I interview teachers about what they do and why they do it. I also ask them how they find out about what, when, and how their children need to learn. One particular routine I examine closely is the writing conference. Across all sites in the study, I record, transcribe, and analyze 108 writing conferences, reflecting on the characteristics of effective and less effective interactions that take place within them (Glasswell, Parr, & McNaughton 2003a; 2003b).

Writing is a daily activity in Eleanor’s class. It usually begins with a short, whole-class activity, based on her ongoing assessments of what her children need to learn. She uses a range of activities for writing, modeling, and guiding children, and provides opportunities for them to explore writing on their own. This morning, for instance, Eleanor “shares the pen” as the whole class writes some news and then get to work on their own writing.

To deal effectively with so many beginning writers, Eleanor groups the children according to their strengths and needs, paying particu-

lar attention to what they already know and can do and what they need to learn next. In this way, the groups are needs-based, but flexible, changing their composition as children learn. She circulates as they work, before settling down with a focus group for each day. There is a level of “productive noise” in the classroom. Eleanor explains that she views this as a positive thing—the result of young children really engaged in problem solving the writing process together.

On this morning toward the middle of the school year, Eleanor is seated with one group of children, helping them as they write. Though not in her group at this moment, Charlie, a Year One student, approaches her to show what he has been working on. The text Charlie brings to share with Eleanor is shown in Figure 1.

Charlie’s text shows his developing understandings about writing on a range of levels. A skilled teacher using any one of a number of assessment tools or frameworks available for close examination of written texts (e.g., Parr, Glasswell, & Aikman, 2007; Pappas, Kiefer, & Levstik, 2005; Spandel, 2008) might look at this text and comment about Charlie’s skills in vari-



Figure 1. Charlie’s first retelling: “I hurt my leg. I hurt my leg. I fell over on the driveway” [because (becos) added after conference]

ous traits of writing. Looking at his attempts to communicate with others, she might note that Charlie is attempting a partial recount of an incident that has happened, including basic description of an event that mattered to him. She might note his use of simple sentences to express his ideas or his many successful and close attempts at invented spellings. By examining children's writing closely over time, teachers can begin to build a comprehensive understanding of what each child knows and can do, and what he or she might benefit from learning next.

CLASSROOM INTERACTIONS AND ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

Examining children's texts for evidence of learning and as a source for thinking about what to teach next is a long-standing and worthwhile tradition in early years classrooms. In process-writing-oriented classrooms like Eleanor's, effective teachers of writing are engaged in an ongoing process of assessing student needs and teaching to meet those needs. In this minds-on approach to assessing student learning (Calkins, 1994), teachers engage in what we often call *formative assessment* or assessment for learning. They gather information about patterns of strengths and needs in order to provide feedback and support to assist learning (Shepherd, 2005; Torrance & Pryor, 1998). These assessment practices have been shown to improve the quality of teaching and learning outcomes in classrooms (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003; Black & Wiliam, 1998).

It is important to note that formative assessment can take two forms: planned or interactive (Cowie & Bell, 1999). Teachers use planned formative assessment when they gather information in a structured way (sometimes from the whole class) and use that information to reflect on learning and make plans for future teaching, including how to differentiate instruction. As teachers examine student texts as a formative assessment practice, they look beyond the text to the context of children's development, considering where they are, how far they have come, and where they are going next. Eleanor uses this approach consistently in her classroom.

At the time of our visit, Eleanor was able to articulate what Charlie can do and what he needs

to learn next. She is a careful "kid-watcher" (Goodman, 1978) and formative assessment—assessment for learning—is a key aspect of her program. She monitors her children closely, examining written products as well as observing them as they work. As a result of this approach, she tracks Charlie's development over time and regularly reflects on his progress. Eleanor tells us that Charlie is one of her more advanced writers. As we watch him during writing workshop, we see that he engages enthusiastically in writing. We see him produce entertaining stories and observe how he talks purposefully with his fellow writers. Eleanor says that Charlie has not always been such a successful writer, and that he has recently made significant progress: "All of a sudden, he has just zipped ahead!"

Another key aspect of Eleanor's practice is the use of classroom interactions as formative assessment. Cowie & Bell (1999) call this kind of practice interactive formative assessment and describe

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how it takes place in a more dynamic way than planned formative assessment, usually transpiring during the student-teacher interactions that are the fabric of learning activities.

It is a social and collaborative activity, aligned firmly with future learning and teaching (Black & Wiliam, 2006; Gardner, 2006), and it takes account of the goals and actions of both teacher and learner as they work in partnership (Hawe, Dixon & Watson, 2008).

A vital ingredient in interactive formative assessment is quality feedback. Quality feedback includes giving not only information about the goals of learning and where the student currently stands in relation to those goals, but also information about how he or she might best move forward (Sadler, 1989). With a focus on this kind of feedback, interactive formative assessment can be a powerful tool in the classroom, especially when teachers focus on transferring responsibility for evaluating performance over to the student.

In our view, interactive formative assessment is central to effective teaching and learning in classrooms. Applied to writing conferences, it is the means by which a knowledgeable teacher recognizes a teachable moment and uses incoming information about a student's performance to give feedback, usually by responding thoughtfully to

what a student knows and can do, and by engaging in focused instruction.

TEACHABLE MOMENTS

The term “teachable moment” is common in the professional language of many teachers. We use it to describe the times when we have found a valuable and authentic opportunity to teach something useful—something we think needs teaching—to someone who needs to learn it and who is ready to learn it right then. It is our everyday way of describing the instantiation of “perfect timing” in a teacher–student learning interaction. Teachable moments have been “noticed” by researchers, too. According to research on exemplary first-grade teachers of literacy (Morrow, Tracey, Gee Woo, & Pressley, 1999), one consistent characteristic of their practice was their ability to connect valuable concepts across different settings and activities. These teachers explicitly make links for children among activities, making use of opportunities to enhance connections for learning in one moment by linking it to another experience.

Using information about children’s developing skill to take advantage of just-right moments to teach has also been noted in work on teachers’ prompting behavior during guided reading sessions. Bob Schwartz (2005) highlights how teachers can respond in specific ways as children present them with opportunities to teach something just at the edge of where a child is developing. Similarly, Larry Sipe (2001) notes some meshing of assessment and teaching during teachable moments when teachers offer active guidance for problem solving as students learn to negotiate invented spellings during writing time.

Teachable moments may occur during writing conferences when teachers individualize instruction and work intensively with developing writers. Research suggests some common themes regarding what makes for a “good” or “effective” conference and how teachers might best manage them (Anderson, 2000; Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1983, 2003), including how to listen and teach in the moment. Many of these authors are advocates of following a child’s lead in order to move him or her forward. Donald Graves (1983, 2003) and

[W]e examine the teachable moment as a space in which complex interrelations among assessment, teaching, and learning become dynamically and productively linked to enhance student learning.

Lucy Calkins (1994), for example, urge teachers to examine what developing writers know and can do in order to understand better what to teach, to whom, and when. Our own research in elementary classrooms in general and on writing conference interactions specifically has caused us to think carefully about writing conferences as sites for assessment and learning. In some of our previous work, we have discussed the elements of effective and less effective conferences and showed how differences in patterns of teachers’ expectations, interactions, and instructional focus can lead to inequities in outcomes for high- and low-progress learners (Glasswell, 2001; Glasswell, Parr, & McNaughton, 2003a).

In the remainder of this article, we examine the teachable moment as a space in which complex interrelations among assessment, teaching, and learning become dynamically and productively linked to enhance student learning. To help us describe and explain our take on this phenomenon, we make use of ideas from the formative assessment field, theories of teaching and learning as social practices, and the role of talk as a mediator for learning.

THE HALLMARKS OF HIGH-QUALITY TEACHABLE MOMENTS

As researchers, we are aware that a “teachable moment” is an unusual unit of analysis for examining teaching and learning and the talk that surrounds it, but we hold theoretical and pragmatic reasons for this choice. Our position is that it is important that researchers and teachers understand the complex and dynamic nature of teaching and learning that occurs in social interactions in classrooms. To better understand this complexity, instead of examining individual turns taken by one participant or another in the conversation, we examine clusters of conversational turns that work together to build extended and collaborative exchanges between teachers and children. Across these clusters of turns, we can obtain a view of how meaning is established and developed by both parties and how learning progresses in the space provided by their collaboration.

In our way of looking at things, the teachable moment is not a split-second opportunity

that occurs and passes. To us, a teachable moment is an episode that is a dynamic blend of interactive formative assessment and needs-based teaching. Furthermore, its evolution is influenced by both the teacher and the child. Before returning to watch Eleanor and Charlie as they talk together about his text, we want to discuss what we consider to be three hallmarks of high-quality teaching and learning that are characteristic of a successful teachable moment.

Hallmark 1: A teachable moment develops from and through a meeting of minds.

The first hallmark of a teachable moment focuses our attention on the “space” where teachers and children might achieve what Jerome Bruner has called a “meeting of minds” (Bruner, 1996). Such a meeting of minds is a key component of current socialization theories that help us understand how children learn and are taught. This space created in interaction is, at first, a cognitive no man’s land, which belongs completely to neither teacher nor writer. There they forge—through joint enterprise—some common understandings based on the learner-writer’s intended meaning and the teacher’s construction of that meaning. This is Vygotsky’s concept of inter-subjectivity (Vygotsky, 1978). In assessment terms, this is also a formative assessment opportunity. Teachers listen and observe, and they come to understand where children are in their learning as writers. At the same time, students are trying to understand what is expected of them and to work out how well they are meeting these expectations. They might ask themselves *What am I meant to do? Why am I meant to do it? How do I learn to do it better? How do I learn from what the teacher says and does?* (McNaughton, 2002). These are questions that learners face every day in classrooms, and the ability to generate answers underpins successful learning in general, and learning in writing, in particular. As teachers and children negotiate this space together, teachers search for ways to understand children, and children attempt to understand the teacher’s perspective. The degree to which they achieve a meeting of minds or a joint focus will influence what proceeds from that space.

Hallmark 2: A teachable moment requires a view from the present that extends to possible futures.

The second hallmark of effective teachable moments is that both teachers and learners focus their efforts in a forward-looking direction. That is to say, they should share a common goal that, over time, the student will learn to complete independently, gradually becoming an expert member of the community of social practice. This is not dissimilar to how one might think of the complex task of learning to drive. Both instructor and learner understand that the ultimate goal of the instruction is that the learner will one day drive independently. Both participants focus their attention in that forward-looking direction. As they drive together, and as each lesson goes by, some new aspect of the task

is mastered by the learner.

While working together, teachers and children need to attend not only to what is already known and what can already be done independently, but to what might be done tomorrow.

Together, they prepare for the day when the driving instructor will have provided enough teaching to put herself, as McNaughton has described, out of business (McNaughton, 1995).

In learning to write, the focus is the same. While working together, teachers and children need to attend not only to what is already known and what can already be done independently, but to what might be done tomorrow—learning in an “embryonic state” (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky likened this to the buds or flowers of development that will flourish at some time in the future. The growth of these buds takes place in what Vygotsky has called the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). This is the imaginary distance between the actual developmental level of a learner when he or she is performing independently and the level of potential development when under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. In assessment terms, this means that we come to know what a learner already knows and what aspects of the child’s learning are beginning to blossom. Finally, teacher and child fix their communal gaze on where the child is ready to go next in his or her learning. In doing this, their interaction becomes focused on assessment for learning, and child and teacher move forward together into the territory of what is yet to be learned.

Hallmark 3: A teachable moment requires scaffolding—an interactive, responsive teaching approach that makes the most of each moment.

Our third hallmark involves the provision of the support system that can take the child from a comfortable status quo to a challenging next step. Effective interactions in a teachable moment rest on the child receiving just the *right* amount of the *right* kind of support, at the *right* time for *just the right* period. This kind of instructional support has been termed “scaffolding,” a metaphor that derives from the work of Wood, Bruner, & Ross (1976). It characterizes the very nature of what we have come to associate with certain forms of effective instruction, and it has had many and wide applications to teaching and learning in classrooms.

In the scaffolding model, parents, teachers, and more skilled peers create a support system, a scaffold, for a learner that enables her to perform tasks and be more skillful than if she were attempting to perform independently. The support structure provided is built on an as-needed basis. It is flexible and temporary, and it diminishes over time as the learner’s skills grow. This instructional scaffolding, like scaffolding on a building, helps a child to reach new heights and is taken down when it is no longer needed. Scaffolding is interactive and responsive. By this we mean that it is influenced by incoming information during the conference: as the child is invited to perform, the teacher makes use of information from interactive formative assessment to make important decisions about how to modify (increase or decrease) the support to help a learner work toward independence.

Many researchers have used variations of this model in discussions about effective instruction. For example, Tharp and Gallimore (1988) have described tutorial interactions, like those that take place between teacher and learner-writer during a writing conference, as being centered on a transfer of responsibility between teacher and learner. Both partners contribute to the construction of the learning system, and effective and targeted feedback on performance is a key part of their partnership (McNaughton, 2002; Sadler, 1989). It is important to note that in this kind of model, while

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both partners contribute to the learning being undertaken, the division of labor in the partnership may not be equal. For example, children may attend independently to aspects of the writing task they can manage competently, while teachers may vary their support, guiding children actively in parts of the task that they are yet to learn fully, or

perhaps modeling those aspects with which learners are completely unfamiliar. In this way, children work at the edges of their developing skills and knowledge, pushing forward with feedback, flexible support, and timely guidance.

We present these hallmarks as a useful way of framing our collective thinking about what constitutes effective interactions around writing. Our conceptually driven yet teaching-oriented view has the effect, we believe, of focusing attention on the “big picture” of broad similarities that contribute to success in teaching and learning interactions.

ASSESSING AND TEACHING IN THE MOMENT WITH CHARLIE

Let’s return to our Year One classroom in Auckland at the moment when Charlie brings his *I hurt my leg* text to Eleanor for conferencing. As we look at their talk and actions, we use our hallmarks to focus attention on the complex and dynamic nature of interactive formative assessment and fine-tuned teaching that takes place during what appear to be straightforward interactions.

The first thing to notice is that the conference is short (only 1 minute 47 seconds). It is nonetheless powerful and, as we will see, has consequences for Charlie’s learning. In the course of just under two minutes, he and Eleanor discuss his invented spellings and Eleanor supports his self-evaluation. Next, they work together on developing skills to evaluate and clarify meaning; finally, Charlie receives some direct instruction on how to make his ideas clearer for his readers.

To begin with, Eleanor greets him with an affectionate name (Charlie Barley) and begins her work of listening, assessing, and guiding his development as a writer. What follows is the transcript of the first episode we examine as a teachable moment:

- 1) **Eleanor:** Right, Charlie Barley! (*Both laugh*).
- 2) **Charlie:** (*Charlie shares his book with Eleanor*) I tried hard but I didn't get some.
- 3) **Eleanor:** (*Eleanor smiles and laughs and turns his book around to see his writing*). OK! What does this say? (*Eleanor re-voices Charlie's written words with enthusiasm*) "I . . . HURT my leg! I hurt my leg! Is this an /h/ here?"
- 4) "What letters did you get right there?"
- 5) **Charlie** (*Charlie looks at his book and points out letters he identifies as correct in the spelling of the word "hurt"*)
- 6) **Eleanor:** The /h/ and the /t/! Pretty good, eh?
- 7) **Charlie:** Mmmm (*smiles and nods, meaning yes*)

In this cluster of seven turns, Eleanor engages Charlie in a way that builds his capacity to reflect on and self-assess his attempts at invented spellings. This moment provides us with some interesting insights into Eleanor's skill as a teacher. Moreover, it shows us (and Eleanor) something about Charlie's own understanding of his development as a self-regulating writer. As Charlie approaches her, even before she begins to speak of his writing, he evaluates his own performance in getting his words down on paper (Turn 2). He tells her what he has been working on in his story (having a go at invented spelling; there is a class-wide expectation to demonstrate a willingness to "take risks" while writing) and Eleanor listens, assessing as she goes, to understand where he is in the process, and she follows him (Turn 3). In these two closely related turns, teacher and child establish a meeting of minds and pursue a joint focus on the task at hand (Hallmark 1). Continuing her work in Turn 3, she encourages Charlie to take further responsibility for monitoring his own progress and looks toward the goals she has for him (Hallmark 2) as an independent, self-reliant writer. It is also here that she begins to support his developing self-regulatory strategies and his "budding" independence as a speller. Instead of simply correcting what is wrong, she engages with him and, by prompting yet more self-reflection, she offers him (Turn 4) the opportunity to identify his successes. Eleanor then confirms his self-assessment and praises him both for getting letters right and, more important, for knowing what he got right (Turn 6).

Eleanor listens, assessing as she goes, to understand where [Charlie] is in the process.

In these very few verbal exchanges, Eleanor and Charlie establish a joint understanding of one of the key components of his instruction at this time: invented spelling. At this point, her goal for him as a learner is that he check on his efforts and engage in self-regulation as a writer. We identify Hallmark 3 in this cluster of conversational turns as the support Eleanor gives to Charlie to help him develop self-regulating behavior. She provides just the right amount of support—not so much that she corrects him or tells him what letters are right, but just enough to prompt him to take responsibility for what he is capable of doing independently. This teachable moment, barely seconds in duration, shows all the hallmarks of high-quality instruction. A joint focus is established, a goal of self-regulation is pursued, and the teacher assesses what Charlie can already do and provides support for his progress toward that goal.

As the conference proceeds (Turns 8–16), Eleanor and Charlie reread his story together, clarifying a word he has attempted to spell. She responds to him as an interested reader, expressing her empathy for the unfortunate incident on the driveway (Turn 16).

- 8) **Eleanor:** (*Eleanor reads from Charlie's book, re-voicing his written text.*) I hurt my leg. That's your title, is it?
- 9) **Charlie:** Mmm (*nods meaning yes*)
- 10) **Eleanor:** What's after that?
- 11) **Charlie:** (*Charlie takes over reading, re-voicing his written text.*) I hurt my leg. I fell over on the driveway.
- 12) **Eleanor:** (*re-voicing Charlie's written text with rising intonation to clarify the upcoming word that Charlie has attempted to spell*) On the . . .?
- 13) **Charlie** (*rereads*) driveway.
- 14) **Eleanor:** driveway?
- 15) **Charlie:** Mmmm. That's all!
- 16) **Eleanor:** Oh, did you? My goodness!

The next cluster of turns provides a powerful teaching opportunity. Eleanor recognizes the chance to pull Charlie into a deeper understanding of writing for an audience other than himself.

In Turns 17–26, they begin to jointly construct an interaction that allows them to connect around a different level of self-monitoring in writing.

17) Eleanor: OK! (*Eleanor re-voices again from Charlie's text. Her voice is slow and thoughtful.*) I hurt my leg (title). I hurt my leg. I fell over on the driveway. (*Eleanor pauses. She looks puzzled and seems to be thinking.*)

18) Eleanor: We need to say something else here. It sounds . . . (*pausing*) Listen, when I read it . . . when I read it to you. (*pausing*) Close your eyes and listen.

19) Charlie: (*Charlie closes his eyes*)

20) Eleanor: (*Eleanor re-voices Charlie's text again slowly and deliberately*) I hurt my leg. . . . I fell over on the driveway. (*She pauses, looking at him, and then continues with a question.*)

21) Eleanor: So . . . did you hurt your leg and then (*said loudly for emphasis*) you fell over on the driveway, or did you hurt your leg by (*said loudly for emphasis*) falling over on the driveway?

(*Another writer interrupts and a few seconds is spent talking with the child*)

22) Eleanor: (*returning her attention to Charlie*) OK. So did you hurt your leg and then you fell over on the driveway, or did you hurt your leg because you fell over on the driveway?

23) Charlie: Because of

24) Eleanor: OK. Well, maybe we need to say that, so people will know.

25) Eleanor: (*rehearsing a clarified version of the story*) I hurt my leg because (*said loudly for emphasis*) I fell over on the driveway!

26) Eleanor: Would you like to write /because/ in? Not much room for it, is there? (*Points to a space*) Over here? (*Eleanor hands him the book and smiles as he returns to his desk to revise his story.*)

Early in this final segment of the conference, Eleanor uses her talk to guide Charlie toward what she wants him to understand and learn. She gives Charlie the feedback that, as a reader, she has questions about the details of the story. It is here that she demonstrates the first hallmark of a teachable moment. She begins to establish a

meeting of minds and a shared focus on her sense of the ambiguity in his story (Turns 17–21). By modeling confusion, Eleanor invites Charlie into her puzzlement, allowing him to arrive at a shared understanding of the “problem.” She does this in a way that gives him time to respond to her puzzlement. Then she tells him explicitly that they need to say something else; she asks him to close his eyes and listen so that they might both “see” what she’s getting at. Re-voicing his text, she makes the story available for his inspection and reflection, and she waits. Again here, her goal is to develop his self-regulation and to promote his independence and problem solving. She deploys “wait time,” so that he has an opportunity to suggest what is needed to move their conversation forward.

In the following turn (Turn 22), deepening the joint focus, she re-voices his text again, and then asks him a question about the actual event that occurred on the driveway. Through this, she leads him toward thinking in certain ways about the communicative problem they are solving together. She pauses again. It is as if she is waiting for the “penny to drop.” Simultaneously assessing Charlie as she teaches, she sees that it doesn’t. Finally, she adjusts her support of him to a higher level, telling him explicitly that perhaps they need to write the cause-and-effect sequence into the story “so people will know” (Turn 24).

Eleanor’s choice of approach here is important to note. She could have simply directed Charlie to include the word so that the story was “correct” or “worked” better, but instead she kept her eye on the horizon of his future learning. In so doing, she ensured that her talk reflected what she was trying to teach him about taking account of readers’ needs. Eleanor’s support for Charlie, though not couched in the form of direct questions or conventional teacher–student dialogue, represents an interactive blend of formative assessment and focused teaching designed to support his learning and to move him forward. She listens carefully, assesses what he knows and can do, and responsively adjusts her talk and teaching in ways that make her scaffolding quite visible. What is also visible is the goal of self-regulation she holds for Charlie’s future development as a writer.

During interviews undertaken in this study, Eleanor talked about wanting more detailed stories from Charlie. She wanted him to be able to

anticipate questions his readers may have as he writes. In Eleanor's terms, good writers anticipate reader needs and reflect on the texts they have written. Her goal for Charlie becomes visible in this teachable moment through the dynamic interplay of interactive formative assessment and sensitive teacher guidance.

Comparing the two teachable moments that occur in this conference, we see two different levels of support for Charlie. In our first example, we notice a low level of support for Charlie's performance because he was already exhibiting a high degree of independence in self-regulating his spelling attempts. Eleanor assessed how well Charlie was already doing with this aspect of writing and provided feedback at a level that supported his developing skill. In the second teachable moment, however, her assessment reveals that Charlie is not yet demonstrating the clarity of writing they have been working toward, so she makes a decision to guide him by constructing a support system that will assist him in clarifying his meaning. Between these two teachable moments, we see flexible and responsive classroom talk being used to build a support system for Charlie's developing expertise in writing.

CHARLIE: WHERE TO NEXT?

Consider with us now the kinds of clues about Charlie's learning that Eleanor might look for as she continues to assess him in the context of his learning and to develop and refine her view of what he can do and what he needs to learn next. This is the kind of information that will help her construct the support systems Charlie will need in future interactions.

To help us further understand the consequences of this interaction for Charlie's learning, we must look closely at another example of Charlie's work as a writer. This time we will examine a text he produced independently the day after this conference took place. As we visit with them at the usual time early in the morning, we see that Eleanor is sitting with a group of children who are writing and talking. She is listening, guiding, and helping. At a table not too far away, Charlie is sitting with a group of his friends chatting and writing. The text he produces is shown in Figure 2.

Like many young children struggling for mastery over new practices, Charlie seems to be

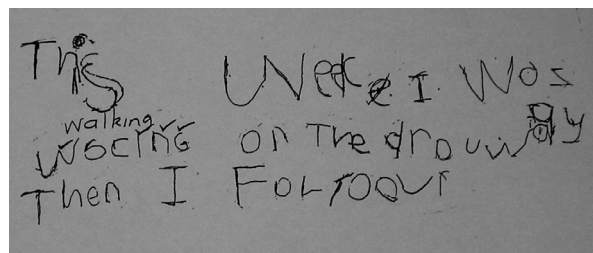


Figure 2. Charlie's second retelling: *This week I was walking on the driveway. Then I fell over.*

experimenting with what he has learned, repeating elements of the task or "problem" to gain control of those things that puzzle him (Clay, 1975; McNaughton, 1995). On this day, he makes another attempt at writing his driveway story, but there are some telling differences between this text and his first attempt (Text 1). Reminiscent of yesterday's conference discussions, today he has adopted a more traditional recount style, setting out when the event took place (this week), what happened (he was walking on the driveway and fell over), and in what order (note his use of the time-related conjunction "then"). This new account of his story is constructed in a way that links two related ideas that are key to understanding exactly what happened on the driveway that day.

It is important to note that Charlie has been inventive with this second retelling. He has not simply reproduced Eleanor's words from the conference yesterday (her suggestion of "because"), he has actually begun his task of experimenting independently with the idea she was promoting (as exemplified in his invented spelling of unfamiliar words). The content of this text reflects how in yesterday's teachable moment #2, Charlie was being pulled into understanding more about how to evaluate whether texts work for readers and how to clarify them when they don't. He experiments with this, and the result is a text that makes the event and the causal connections much clearer.

There is no writing conference around this revision; Eleanor is working with other writers today, which makes Charlie's efforts all the more telling. Examining this text in light of the other assessment information that Eleanor gathers about Charlie, we can understand why she has recently come to see Charlie as being on a real growth curve in his writing. He shows her that her use of a teachable moment has been successful. He

demonstrates in unassisted work today, that which yesterday he could only complete with her help. It is through careful consideration of his written texts and reflection on their conversations around them that Eleanor is able to seamlessly blend her interactive formative assessment with just-right instruction. Charlie is most certainly zipping ahead, but it is his collaboration with his teacher that pushes and pulls at the cutting edge of his developing skill levels.

MAKING THE MOST OF TEACHABLE MOMENTS

We have argued here that the everyday teachable moment requires of teachers very complex work. Our view is that these moments are more than spontaneous occurrences that happen when gifted teachers are listening carefully to their students and responding intuitively. Rather, we suggest that teachable moments are grounded in a deeper understanding of formative assessment (assessment for learning) and its place in the instructional fabric of classroom interactions. We have proposed that to be effective in teachable moments, teachers need to know where their students are in their learning, where each student needs to go to become more skilled, and how classroom talk can create a meaningful scaffold. Without such foundations, the conversations that take place—no matter if they emerge from the student's own initiative or interests—will be “fleeting” and will not necessarily accumulate to support sustained learning in writing.

Understanding talk as a flexible support system for student learning is key to making the most of teachable moments. As we saw from Eleanor's work with Charlie, and as Sipe (2001) and Schwarz (2005) point out, teachers vary the style of their talk depending on the amount and kind of support a learner needs to move ahead. With this in mind, our account of the hallmarks of effective interactions is not meant to be seen as prescriptive, or as a way of representing a complex act as a sequence of actions that teachers can implement to achieve high-quality instruction. Rather, our desire is to contribute to collective understandings of the complex and dynamic interplay of formative assessment, teaching, and learning that occurs in everyday classroom contexts.

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