

Writing: a moving experience

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Michael Jones explains the importance of mark making in learning to write and describes a project involving four year olds in six Luton schools that also provides pointers towards helping older children with additional learning needs

First steps to writing

Parents often assume that their child's first step towards becoming a writer will be when they can write their own name. While writing their name is an exciting milestone in any child's development, their journey as a writer began well before this. In fact we can argue that the journey begins in infancy, with coordinated movement and speech and language development. Along the way children develop knowledge about how letters are formed in their culture, and how these relate to sounds in their language. This understanding will ideally have been gained through practice and experimentation, by making lots of marks, in lots of different ways, and with lots of different materials.

Building confident writers

Learning to write is closely linked to language development and understanding of reading and like talking and reading, involves handling abstract symbols. As in learning to talk and to read, children go through clearly defined stages on their way to becoming confident writers. They begin the process by making random marks, and move through several phases to eventually use symbols and letters in linear form, as they hopefully emerge as prolific writers, who write clearly identifiable words to express their ideas.

Motivation and confidence are the most important ingredients for mastering any new skill, and learning to write is no exception. For children, these skills develop through seeing other people writing, and making sense of and practising the skill through play, in an environment where adults respond with pleasure and praise as the child's skills progress. In fact, being involved in a wide range of fun mark making activities provides the best possible foundation for the process of learning to write.

Four vital points need to be understood if we are to provide children with solid foundations as confident writers:

- Confidence comes through experimentation.
- Experimentation needs to be with lots of different mark making tools and media, and not just pencil and paper.
- Skills develop through practice.
- Role-play can provide some of the best opportunities for experimenting, practising, and making sense of *why* we need to write in the first place!

We will all recognise that some children need more support and encouragement than others. Even as young as four years of age there will be children who shy away from any activities where marks are to be made on paper, and in some cases find the act of writing very distressing. Generally we would be right in assuming that most of these reluctant children are boys, but from my experience there will be several girls in any setting who lack confidence with early writing. For whatever reason, many of these children feel that writing has to be exact, and have developed a fear of not being able to write their name or numbers properly.

The On Your Marks! approach

To address some of these issues, four -year-olds in six Luton schools took part in an experimental 10-week project, which we called '*On Your Marks!*' Each school looked specifically at increasing the range of opportunities for making marks in the Foundation Stage. The schools received funding for materials, and to provide cover so staff could take time to develop own ideas. Each set of staff chose the particular areas they wanted to focus on, including fine motor skills, mark making outside, mark making and role play, and music movement and mark making.

As leader of the project, my brief was to work closely with children and adults to explore new approaches that would develop all children's confidence in mark making. I worked in each school for six half days, as well as leading an after-school training session, so that all staff were equipped to take part.

Write Dance

One activity that was very popular with staff and children alike involved linking movement with mark making. *Write Dance* is a movement programme that seeks to develop children's understanding of the movements needed for effective handwriting, as well as giving important practice. The programme was designed by Ragnhild Oussoren, who worked for many years as a consultant graphologist in the Netherlands and in Sweden. She mixed her graphology skills with art and music, and *Write Dance* emerged as an approach that links movement, music art and writing. The approach is aimed at children aged three to 12 years, but there are implications for older children: possibly with specific learning difficulties or significant additional learning needs.

The programme incorporates playful songs, rhymes and games to help children acquire and consolidate the range of movements and patterns needed for writing. All the movements in *Write Dance* are linked through a storyline, and it is the movement and rhythm for writing that are stressed, rather than the individual formation of letter shapes. There are two main concepts: 'movements in your space' and 'scrimbling'.

'Movement in your space' refers to the idea that children do not need a large space to move around in when making large movements. These can be done standing up, sitting down, or even on lying on your tummy! This is particularly helpful when working in schools or pre-school settings where there is limited space, or where the hall is in regular use by other classes or for other purposes. Children are encouraged to make large continuous, symmetrical movements with both hands: moving towards the midline of the body, across it, and back again.

'Scrimbling' is the term used to describe various ways of making marks, and includes scribbling, wriggling and doodling movements. It also refers to the various ways that children can make the movements needed for writing, using a wide range of different mark making tools and activities, and encouraging children to come up with their own ideas. These might include using watering cans on the surface of the playground, or squirting plant sprays filled with water on walls outside. Other imaginative ideas for making patterns include using illuminated magic wands in a darkened room, using play dough, sticks in sand, blackboards, sponges and brushes, large chinks in the playground, finger painting and shaving foam.

Sessions in action

So what might a typical *Write Dance* session look like? While the books provide ideas for movement sessions, we decided to take the basic principles and give them a twist that would be certain to engage all of the young children we were working

with. Over our 10-week project we decided to focus on three patterns: circles, waves and zigzags. Our key aim was to create imagery through music, movement, stories and songs that would capture the children's imaginations in such a way that they would associate large movements with the fine motor movements and patterns needed for handwriting.

We began planning each session by deciding on the key vocabulary we wanted children to know and use. We considered what songs and stories we could use to introduce the movement, and what music we needed to produce an exciting image while children were moving and making 'scrimbling' marks. Finally we planned extension activities, including art and drama, displays, or mark making activities outside, as well as handwriting patterns. As we were working with very young children, many of whom were learning English as an additional language, it was important to try and create activities from ideas that the children were already familiar with.

'Waves' was a very popular session. Although our key word was 'wave', we needed to establish exactly what type of wave we were referring to: waves in water, and particularly the sea (as opposed to waving to someone, or having wavy hair!). We found it useful to have a story and chat session in class before moving to the larger space in the hall, and in this case we based our introduction on the theme of the sea, sea creatures and pirates. Our 'theme tunes' were the jolly theme music from 'Captain Pugwash', and quiet and reflective 'Albatross' by Fleetwood Mac. These had been downloaded from iTunes, onto my iPod, and played through a docking station. Our actions were with arms undulating either from our chests in front of us, out and back, or from our sides crossing our midlines and back again.

We looked at bath toys, including wind up plastic swimmers, a scuba diver, a submarine and a variety of plastic sea creatures. We played with these in the water tray, created waves, and talked about which toys would go on top of the waves or below them. As would be expected, this created a lot of excitement, and children were very keen to share their experiences of playing in the bath or going to the seaside. At this point we shared a story about pirates, and showed the children photographs of different types of waves, and introduced our wave action.

Our first activity in the hall involved a large parachute. It is inevitable that any group of children given a parachute will want to shake it vigorously, and this automatically creates a wave effect. We showed the children how to make wild waves and gentle ripples, and I told a story of how as a young child I had been paddling in the water (gentle ripples accompanied by 'Albatross') when suddenly the wind started to blow stronger and stronger until there was a howling gale (very violent shaking of the parachute). When the sea had calmed I looked out and saw a ship sailing towards me. It was a pirate ship! (Violent shaking of the parachute accompanied by the theme from 'Captain Pugwash'). Once the parachute had been put away, we moved around the room together, accompanied by the music, making our wave movements. Our movements were either calm and relaxed or quick and excitable, depending on the clips of music that we played.

We finished with our 'scrimbling' activity. I rolled out a long roll of lining paper, and secured it to the floor at various points with masking tape. (Lining paper is white paper used for covering walls before painting, and available from most hardware shops). Each child was given two stubby wax crayons: one for each hand. The children knelt on the edge of the paper along its length, and as we played the music they drew wave patterns. This proved to be very pleasing for children, and the end result looks very impressive. Many children spontaneously decided to lie on their

tummies, and it looked almost as if they were swimming as they drew! The end result was a spectacular set of different coloured waves that could have been used as backing for a display about the sea.

By the end of the session, and during activities that followed, the children were very focused on the concept of waves, and referred to them spontaneously in extension activities and during pre-writing activities. Other themes that we experimented with included circles and zigzags, which were equally as popular and successful.

The Luton 'On Your Marks!' project was primarily aimed at children in Early Years settings, but there are implications for older children. While many children find learning to write to be very natural, there are many who find it to be a complex and frustrating process. This may be because they lack experience, which is often reflected in other areas of learning, and particularly in language development. Activities that encourage experimentation, particularly if they involve music, movement and role-play, will help to broaden experience and enjoyment.

Further reading

Oussoren, R (2000) *Write Dance*. Lucky Duck Publishers

Oussoren, R (2006) *More Write Dance: extending the development of Write Dance* for children aged 4 to 8. Lucky Duck Publishers

Oussoren, R (2008) *Write dance in the nursery*. Lucky Duck Publishers

Mark making matters: young children making meaning in all areas of learning and development. DCSF 2008

Supporting children's writing development in the Early Years. Lawrence Educational Publications 2010

Gateway to Writing <http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/254287>

For more information about young children's mark making and language development visit www.talk4meaning.co.uk

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