

Perchance to dream, perchance to write for young children

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Anne Haas Dyson, a professor of curriculum and instruction in the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign College of Education, says that a highly-regimented writing curriculum that prohibits young children from borrowing from our common cultural landscape -- movies, TV shows, comic books and cartoons -- is a problematic one. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

An approach to teaching young children the principles of writing and literacy that prohibits them from borrowing from our common cultural landscape is a problematic one, according to a University of Illinois professor who studies childhood learning and literacy development.

Anne Haas Dyson, a professor of curriculum and instruction in the U. of I. College of Education, says that excluding pop culture touchstones such

as movies, TV shows, comic books and cartoons from composition programs in order to focus almost exclusively on the everyday occurrences of a child's life is a contradictory notion, at best.

"Since the line between fiction and reality for younger students is often very thin, it's inevitable that children will borrow from what they know, and that they will create stories where they and their friends interact with Spider-Man, the X-Men or Hannah Montana," Dyson said.

Not to be confused with [plagiarism](#), copying, which could be thought of as an adolescent version of what hip-hop artists call "sampling," has a long history as a pedagogical tool for teaching younger students the alphabet and letter formation. It was once advocated as a method for helping them make sense of written language and its connection to meaning, and was considered an intrinsic part of the production process for beginning writers.

Now, with schools under pressure to teach basic composition skills because of the regulated curriculum mandates of No Child Left Behind, Dyson says there has been a curricular rejection of open-ended composing, especially in schools serving low-income children, in favor of [writing instruction](#) that is much more regimented.

In these programs, writing is conscripted as an individual task, one that requires diligence and independence, and doesn't allow for community participation.

"Even in kindergarten, we have these regulated writing programs where the child is supposed to write their own story based on their own life," Dyson said. "It's a conception of writing that invokes this myth of the solitary genius, where the great writer sits alone at a desk and writes. If you think of writing only in those terms, it becomes something quite different than how it actually functions in the world, which is as a

medium for communication and participation."

Dyson argues that allowing children to copy or borrow plotlines, narratives and characters from popular culture for their writing is a good thing, because that's where they find their identities and otherwise make sense of the world.

"A lot of the so-called stories [young children](#) are writing in schools are pretty banal and boring," she said. "If they're going to live in this highly mediated, increasingly global world, we want to prepare them to be a part of it."

Although she's not arguing for a return to any old-fashioned methods of [teaching](#), Dyson says that children who "copy" or play with ideas from popular media are "using elements of known stories to populate and imagine their own worlds," she said.

"Out on the playgrounds, children play together with characters and plotlines from media stories, improvising their own versions of these tales, sometimes putting elements of varied stories together," Dyson said. "In their writing, they build on what they do in play."

Sometimes, young children use writing to collaboratively imagine or play out worlds on paper. When young children get the idea that they can choreograph their papers with their friends, or if what this one is going to write is going to be a response to what their friends wrote, that's pretty sophisticated thinking, Dyson says.

"Each child may have their own paper, but they choreograph their papers so that they are playing together, and they understand the idea that they're joining a textual playground with somebody else, and manipulating them through words or stories," she said. "That is the essence of what you want to teach, that writing matters in the world."

Instructing young children to write only about the everyday occurrences of their own lives is just another version of the banning of the imagination in schools, Dyson says.

"This shoving down of highly regulated curriculum is cause for great concern," she said. "In a lot of kindergartens, there is no more unstructured play. Kids are sitting at desks, doing work in a highly individualized way. And the more we push it down, the more kids there will be who are classified as struggling."

Another way to think about writing is that it's another way of participating in a community, Dyson said.

"We join the conversation in some way, and that's what children are doing, too," she said.

But young children's worlds, social concerns and common topics are going to be quite different from those of adults.

"For young children, writing is seldom about churning out well-crafted narratives," Dyson said.

The two competing worlds, however, need not be mutually exclusive: A creative, observant teacher can use the fertile imaginations of their students to teach official school curriculum.

"[Writing](#) is all about how you're portraying a world, and when teachers bring play and creativity back into the official curriculum, that's a great opportunity," Dyson said. "I think one thing children need to learn is that our texts have ramifications in the world. People don't always agree that this is something that children need to know about, or they may feel the need to protect children from their own play rather than encouraging children to talk about the issues in that play."

Curricular benchmarks such as capital letters, punctuation and spelling are not unimportant, Dyson said, but students will learn to punctuate better if they're crafting a sentence or a story that has meaning for them.

"If the text means anything, it has to reverberate and make sense to them," she said. "They'll see that the choices they make as author matter because they're going to influence other people."

More information: Dyson's research was published in the March issue of the Journal of Early Childhood Literacy.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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