Becoming a Writer – A digital story

Developed by the VCAA Early Years Unit in partnership with Dr Noella Mackenzie (Charles Sturt University)

This resource has been developed to support ongoing engagement with the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework, partnerships with families around children’s learning and planned and spontaneous opportunities for diverse drawing and writing experiences.

Hello and welcome to Becoming a Writer, 2, a resource developed for early childhood professionals and families with young children.

My name is Noella Mackenzie and I work as a Senior Lectures in Literacy Studies at Charles Sturt University in Albury. Since 2007 I have been conducting research in how children learn to write. In 2015 I worked with Carmel Phillips and Maggie Bishop from the VCAA, along with a group of Prep and Kindergarten teachers from the Marysville Cluster and Darebin Early Years Network.

This resource aims to go a little way towards answering three questions:

The first:

What do children learn about writing before they start school?

The second:

What do children learn about writing in the first year of school?

And third:

How can families help children become writers?

While this resource focuses on early writing that does not mean that reading is not important. Children benefit greatly from being read to every day, between 3 and 5 stories a day is recommended, starting when children are babies and continuing right throughout primary school. Teaching children nursery rhymes, poems and songs also helps with children’s reading, writing, vocabulary, language development and memory.

The little boy on the left in this slide is only 6 months old and just learning how to sit up but you can tell that he is already very observant. By 15 months old his favourite toy is an old hands-free phone. He regularly conducts his own calls, copying his parents. Children notice what others around them are doing and are keen to copy. They will want to learn to write if they see you writing.

This next slide shows a range of drawings from a child who was 3 ½ at the time. Young children naturally like to draw if they have the opportunity and encouragement to do so. Children also love it when an adult draws with them. While textas and pencils can be messy, drawing is a very important form of expression and creativity. Drawing is a powerful way of exploring ideas as well as being a substantive mental activity, a socially meaningful activity, and a constructive process of thinking in action which allows access to real and imaginary worlds. When children draw – they are playing with pencils and textas. Drawing and talking work together to allow children to create and communicate complex messages. Visual literacy has become an essential part of 21st century literacy as computers use pictures, icons, movies, music, and sound effects to extend on the use of print.

Drawings offer a format for children to engage in visual literacy from a very young age. Drawing also teaches children a lot of the skills they will need when they begin to write. Drawings increase in detail as children draw more often. Drawings, like the one drawn by a four year old that you are looking at now, take a great deal of time and concentration and give practice at working with pens and pencils. How you respond to children’s early attempts at drawing and writing will make a huge difference to their interest and willingness to learn.

Often children’s drawings are assumed to be a picture of something or a method of recording an event which has occurred earlier. However, if we observe closely as children draw, and listen to their talk, we can sometimes witness drawing as a form of play.

In this picture John wanted to play with his favourite toy but the toy was at home and he was at school. In order to play with his rabbit, John drew pictures of the rabbit doing different things and talked about what was happening as he put the rabbit on different machines. His talk was for no one but himself in much the same manner as children talk while they play dress-ups – or play with toys in the sandpit.

In this picture – it may look like Brooke is just scribbling but this is a beautiful example of how young children between 2 and 4 years of age begin to explore the idea of drawing and writing. Brooke is demonstrating that she knows that people sometimes record their ideas on paper. She is lucky to have her dad’s encouragement. These days we all write on computers, tablets and phones but we still need to write on paper. It may be a shopping list, a birthday card or one of the many forms we all have to fill out. You can encourage your young child to write lists and cards – these early experiences are the start of something special.

In this slide we have a perfect example of a child, only just 4, who understands the power of writing long before he has learned any letters or words. When his Mum asked him if he would like to invite his Nanny and Poppy to his preschool concert he asked for some paper and a pencil. As he wrote he recited his message.

Dear Nanny and Poppy

Please come to my concert, if you want. It is over there at the preschool.

(At this stage he pointed in the direction of the preschool). He finished quite formally with:

You would be very welcome,

Charlie.

Apparently, at kindergarten they had been talking about invitations and letters.

This is a birthday card for Charlie’s great grandmother. He has drawn lots of family members as well as the family dogs. In this example, he asked his mum to write some of the names of the people and the dogs that he had drawn. By asking his Mum to do this he is demonstrating that he knows the power of writing. He also knows the difference between his drawing and his Mum’s writing. In the middle on the left hand side you will see where he has tried to write his name. Because he started in the middle of the page he has written his name backwards. This is very common in the early stages of writing. In many cases it is simply a matter of starting in the wrong place. If they start on the right side of the page or space they write backwards. If they start on the left side they don’t write backwards. Most children reverse some letters in the early stages of writing too. This is not something to worry about.

This slide shows two samples from the same child in the same week. Both were created at home. On the left you see a detailed drawing of pirates and sea creatures. On the right you can see a recipe which Charlie knew needed words. Although he had only just learnt how to write his name, he was already using the letters from his name to help him to write a recipe.

Learning to write their name is the first time children really engage with writing letters and words. As you can see in these examples these children have varied control over this process. It is a big advantage to be able to recognise and write your name when you start school.

Here are some further examples created by young children who can already write their own name and now are learning to write names of other family members and friends. Magnetic letters on the fridge are a great way of introducing children to names.

As you can see, Krisha can write her own name as well as her brother’s name. The Kindergarten teacher has labelled the butterfly and her brother and added a sentence about the sun. Having someone - a teacher or a parent or carer add words to a drawing is one of the ways children learn more about writing.

This example shows the power of purpose. Jonathon, Aged 5, asked his mother for a basketball again and again. She told him he would have to ask his dad. His response was:

But he isn’t here.

Mum replied:

Write him a letter – so he did.

It says:

Dad - Please give me a basketball –

Jonathon.

When dad came home from work he was so impressed with Jonathon’s letter that he took him shopping and bought him a basketball.

Here is another example of how creative children can be.

Corey, aged 5, made this sign for his door.

Up the top it says:

No girls allowed – unless it is important.

It would seem that Corey wanted his big sister to respect his privacy. A powerful message created by a young learner using drawing and writing together.

Writing is a very complex process with so many things for young children to learn. When children start school they will be encouraged to draw and talk with friends. Working collaboratively allows children to talk about their ideas and learn from each other.

It is also important for children to develop a correct pencil grip from a young age. So don’t wait until they are off to school to teach them how to hold their pencil correctly. At school children use whiteboards and magnetic letters to help with their learning. They also have alphabet charts to refer to when they need them.

Here is a child in the first year of school drawing and writing, and he is using the top page of his book as a ‘have a go’ page. This is where he will have a go at words or letters that he may be unsure of. The teacher may also use this page to teach him how to write a letter, a new word, to hear the sounds in a word or to spell a word that his is unsure of. At school children are given opportunities to write in many different ways.

In this slide the child on the left is using coloured sand to practice constructing letters and words and the little girl on the right is using a tablet for the same purpose.

In the example on the screen now you will see that the little girl has written:

Sometimes my dad feeds … (across the bottom of the page) and then when she ran out of room, she wrote:

My chooks (above the first part of the sentence).

This kind of thing is very common in Prep. She doesn’t have a learning problem. She’s just learning the rules of writing.

By encouraging children to combine drawing and writing children can create more complex messages than they can create with words alone.

This story says:

I live at Splitters Creek with 6 chooks, 1 rooster, 1 dog, 4 fish, 1 brother and my mum and dad.

This was created when the child was in late Prep.

Your child should be encouraged to continue to draw while he is learning how to write.

This is another example collected towards the end of the first year of school.

The child shows she has learned a lot about writing. Her meaning is very clear as she writes about where she lives, who she plays with and things she likes to do.

She also knows where to start (the top left hand corner), which way to go (across the page, back to the left for the next line).

She has clear spaces between her words. There are a number of words she has written correctly and others she is still learning how to write. She’s had a good go at the sounds that she could hear in the word ‘court’ and she has written p – a – y for play. The ‘l’ is hard to hear in the word play.

You will also see that she has left the silent ‘e’ off the end of ‘like’.

You may notice that she has written the ‘g’ back to front in ‘go’ but this sample shows that she is well underway to being a writer of English, a tricky language to learn.

As a parent you can provide your child with opportunities to experience their world so that they have many reasons to draw, talk and write. This need not be expensive, read to them, give them pencils, crayons, paints and paper, take them to the library, play games with them in the backyard, take them to the park, or just go for a walk together. Spending time playing or making things with a special grown up also provides opportunity for lots of talk. As you talk with children you help them to develop their language use, you help them to build their vocabulary and they will notice more about the world around them. Knowing lots of words helps with reading and writing.

The little boy in this photo is being introduced to his first stick insect by his dad. He is only 15 months old but you can tell by his face that he was very interested in his new friend. He is lucky to have a dad who makes time for this kind of interaction.

I hope you have found this resource interesting and helpful. There is also a free brochure available for download from the VCAA website or my webpage these will act as a reminder of the messages in the presentation.

If you have questions and you are a parent or carer please talk to your child’s Prep or Kindergarten teacher or use the contact details provided at the end of this resource to talk to someone from the Early Years Unit at the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority.

Thank you

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Note: this resource was developed from an original research project in 2012, Becoming a writer, between NSW Department of education and Communities, Riverina Equity Programs and Charles Sturt University

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