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## *Marginalia: A Comprehension Strategy to Help Young Children Play with and Learn from Published Texts*
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Marginalia is the term used to describe the drawings, written notes, under linings, illustrations, and/or diagrams that are inserted by readers in and around a published text. Work of this kind is taking place actively in literary criticism, and as a result, literary scholars are able to reconstruct the thought processes and informational factors that affected not only the readers construction of meaning regarding a given text, but since most of the people studied have been or are writers, and careful analysis has led to informed guesses about how a writer's reading and therefore thinking have affected decisions writers have made in subsequent texts they have written. This work has allowed for a lot of insight in the works of writers.

We recognized, given our knowledge of cognitive processing and comprehension, that we could model for children how to annotate their texts, and do this at the appropriate developmental level, and that their marginalia would reveal a lot about how children construct meaning from texts. Also, given that our approach to all of this, which was very supportive and light as opposed to harsh and **academically rigorous,** we assumed or guessed that children would come to see this activity as a form of play with texts.

Viewed from the continuum from play to work, which includes

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- Child-Initiated Play, Freely Chosen

- Facilitative Play—Adults monitor more closely at first

- Directed play—Adults impose play elements

- Work Disguised as Play

- Work

That our **marginalia activities** fall somewhere across all of these categories, almost as if they fall into a new category of their own. Even though cognitively underpinned, the thrill and enthusiasm with which children approach the marginalia tasks modeled for them originally, combined with the reality that they do have control over how they create their own marginalia, and what criteria they use, suggests a lot of free choice on the part of children here. Our **marginalia activities** are most likely initially Directed Play which then take on the qualities of Facilitative Play.

The purpose of the work we have done thus far has been to very loosely try these ideas out, in an attempt to get enough of an idea of what is really happening so we can develop a more detailed research project, and we do plan to do this.

***Three Key Questions Guided Our Study***

1. How does marginalia influence readers' experiences in K – 5 classrooms?

2. When given the option, do students in K – 5 classrooms use marginalia? If yes, who chooses to use it and how?

3. What do students in K – 5 classrooms say about using marginalia?

Initially, five, white, female elementary-level teachers who hold reading specialist certification and teach in rural area schools agreed to participate in the study: a Title 1

preschool teacher (4 and 5-year-olds), Kindergarten, 1$^{st}$ grade, and 2$^{nd}$ grade teacher, and a reading specialist in a preK-5 elementary school. Unfortunately, a few weeks into the study, the 1$^{st}$ grade teacher was unable to continue, and data from the preK-5 reading specialist was not available at the time of this writing. Therefore, this article focuses on findings from a preschool, Kindergarten, and 2$^{nd}$ grade classroom in rural schools in three neighboring counties. Two of the schools serve a high number of students who are eligible for free lunch. All of the students in the study are white.

The authors, both white, education professors at Emory & Henry College, held three meetings with the participants. During the first meeting, we shared our ideas about how each teacher might introduce and use marginalia with her students. We also provided a possible model for collecting data; that is, a suggested procedure and point of analysis. Nevertheless, we were open to the participants' ideas about how they wanted to investigate students' uses of marginalia in their classrooms.

The preschool teacher was the only participant who used our suggested procedures. The remaining teachers decided on slightly different approaches than those we proposed. Following is a description of each teacher's procedure, points of analysis, and conclusion.

### Preschool

Jamie, (pseudonym) a Title 1 preschool teacher, chose to use marginalia with her students as a way of remembering and representing details in a narrative text. Jamie's choice was guided by her beliefs about teaching and learning. In her words, "Using words and symbols for recall purposes can begin as soon as young children are given paper and

writing implements. Encouraging scribbling and doodling soon leads to representative drawings that have meaning" (personal communication, 2006).

Jamie chose to have her students use marginalia in the form of scribbling, drawing pictures, and using a mix of letters and numbers, or kinder-writing as it is called, to respond to text. Following is a summary of Jamie's procedures and observations:

Day 1 - Jamie read a story to her students and modeled, using a think-aloud, how she could respond to a book by drawing pictures of story details and then labeling her illustrations.

Day 2 – Next, she read a story to her students about seven pigs. On each page of the book, there is a picture of a pig eating a different kind of food. The text supports each illustration. Jamie showed text pictures during the reading. After the story, she asked her students to draw one of the pigs eating one of the foods from the story. Jamie characterized the students' reaction to the marginalia activity. In her words, "The children were excited. While they were instructed to illustrate one food item, many students chose more than one item to include in their picture, and I encouraged them to do so" (personal communication, 2006).

Day 3 - Jamie read a different book to her students and asked them to draw several things that illustrated what the main character did, i.e., the action of the story.

According to Jamie, "Most students enjoyed the opportunity to be creative. Their comprehension of the story was very high as exhibited by their drawings and labeling of the pictures and their retellings of the story."

Day 4 - Jamie read Five Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed, (Christelow, 1989) to her students and allowed them to choose the focus of their responses. For the most part, the

students' responses focused on the story's main idea. Therefore, the students either represented the monkeys jumping on the bed or their mama who is sleeping.

Overall, Jamie reported that she was impressed with the strategy. She remarked that up to this point, she had never asked children to respond to text with pictures and scribbles. Rather, Jamie only had children discuss the story with her. Now she plans to continue using marginalia in her classroom because she recognizes the children's interest in this activity (engagement), their willingness to participate (interest), and an increase in student-led discussions about the text while they are recording their responses. Overall, Jamie noted that when her students use marginalia their ability to retell stories sequentially and with greater detail improves.

*Conclusions:*

*Marginalia, defined as scribbling, drawing, and kinderwriting, is an activity that preschool children in Jamie's class enjoy so much that they ask their teacher if they can use it when she does not assign it. Marginalia provides Jamie with a method to assess what her students understand and remember about a story, e. g., story details and main ideas. It also provides a means for students to choose what they want to express, both orally and in writing, about what they have read.*

KINDERGARTEN

Angela (pseudonym) wanted to investigate whether marginalia increases oral vocabulary development. Angela verbally defined and discussed the meanings of five teacher-chosen words from a story she planned to read aloud to a group of ten children. After she discussed the vocabulary words with her students using picture cues from the text to support the explanation, she asked half of her students, Group A, to draw a picture to

illustrate each word. When the students completed their drawings, Angela transcribed their oral definitions for them beside their pictures. The remaining five students, Group B, did not illustrate the word. A week later, Angela asked all ten students to define orally the vocabulary words without support of any kind. She compared the two groups in an effort to determine whether those who illustrated the vocabulary words remembered the definitions better than those who did not illustrate. Using a second story, Angela flipped the groups so Group B had an opportunity to illustrate, while Group A did not.

For her study, Angela chose one male and one female who, according to her professional judgment, are functioning at a high level of academic ability, two females, and four males who are functioning at an average range of academic ability, and one male and one female who are functioning at a low range of academic ability. Angela, recorded the students' outcomes.

| Participants | Group 1- with illustrations | | Group 1 – without illustrations | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | RIGHT | WRONG | RIGHT | WRONG |
| Female A1 (high) | 66% | 33% | 50% | 50% |
| Female B1 (avg) | 50% | 50% | 50% | 50% |
| Male C1    (avg) | 33% | 66% | 33% | 66% |
| Male D1    (low) | 33% | 66% | 0% | 100% |
| Male E1    (avg) | 66% | 33% | 33% | 66% |

| | Group 2- with illustrations | | Group 2 – without illustrations | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | RIGHT | WRONG | RIGHT | WRONG |
| Male A2    (avg) | 50% | 50% | 17% | 83% |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Female B2 (avg) | 83% | 17% | 33% | 66% |
| Female C2 (low) | 17% | 83% | 0% | 100% |
| Male D2   (high) | 83% | 17% | 83% | 17% |
| Male E2   (avg) | 66% | 33% | 33% | 66% |

OVERALL OUTCOMES

70%  GAIN

30%   NO GAIN

GAIN

| High Female | Avg. Males | Avg. Females | Low Male | Low Female |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 100% (1 of 1) | 75% (3 of 4) | 50% (1 of 2) | 100% (1 of 1) | 100% (1 of 1) |

NO Gain

| High Male | Avg. Males | Avg. Females |
|---|---|---|
| 100% (1of 1) | 25% (1of 4) | 50% (1 of 2) |

*Conclusions:*

*Vocabulary scores for the female and male students functioning in the low range of academic success improved as a result of using marginalia. Scores for the majority of males (3 out of 4) functioning in the average range improved. Scores for the female student functioning in the high range improved; however, scores for the male student in that range did not improve.*

Grade 2

Terry (pseudonym) used short, leveled readers that accompany her students' basal reading series. She introduced marginalia by telling her students that this was a method she herself used as a college student. She first modeled the use of marginalia two ways: summarizing main ideas into one sentence and responding to the reading by reacting to what she found interesting. She then allowed her students try it on their own. Terry made copies of the students' books so they could actually write in the margin of the text. She urged her students to respond to the text in anyway they would like (e.g., writing, underlining, and/ or drawing pictures). Terry predicted that marginalia would increase her students' scores on end-of-book tests created by the text's publisher. She planned to keep track of students' test scores to see whether marginalia could account for any noticeable changes. Terry used the strategy with her least competent readers and writers.

*Conclusions:*

*Terry had predicted that her students would choose to underline text rather than respond in writing because, as she put it, "Writing is one of their weakness." However, each child wrote his reactions in the margin of the text. The majority of marginalia responses students recorded were interpretative and evaluative; that is, their responses evidenced use of higher level thinking skills. For example:*

*Page 3 Story Text (Adams, 2005):*

*No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't bat, throw, or catch. Did I let that stop me from playing? I should say not!*

*\*(I) indicates inference the student made after reading the text.*

Student 1: He always tried his best (I)

Student 2: he's doesn't give up (I)

Student 3:  he always tried harder (I)

Page10 *Story Text (Adams, 2005):*

*I knew my teammates were thinking the same thing, because I had struck out twice already. I had to get on base! I couldn't mess up, not this time.*

Student 1: he is going to do his best (I)

Student 2:  he thought he could make it (I)

Page11 *Story Text (Adams, 2005):*

*I could hear my mom shouting, "Come on, Billy! As I turned and looked at my dad, he said, "Just play your best, Billy." He tried to smile, but I knew he was worried. I stepped up at the plate, ready as I'd ever be.*

*Whoosh! The ball was too low, so I didn't try to hit it, which was a good thing. "Ball one!" yelled the umpire.*

Student 1: his parents wanted him to do his best (I)

Student 2: he new that he could make it (I)

*Five of the six questions that follow each story in the reading series text require higher level thinking skills (e.g., The score was 5 to 4. The Hawks were winning. It was Billy's turn at bat. Why does he think this is "terrible luck?"  What might have happened if Billy had stayed on first base instead of trying to go to second base?)*

*Since her students have begun using marginalia, Terry has noted improvement in her students' ability to answer the end-of-story questions, most of which require higher level thinking skills. She notes that her learners enjoy the strategy due in part to the fact that they are enacting college-level student behaviors.*

Study's Implications

Prior to this study, our participating teachers were not providing opportunities for their students to respond in written form to text during reading. Typically, written responses, including drawing and writing, took place after reading in the form of summarizing a passage, sharing one's favorite part of the story, or answering teacher-generated or text-generated questions. Generally, we find the later examples to be the current practice in most educational settings that we observe. Since meaning-making is an on-going, dynamic and interactive process between the author and the reader, it stands to reason and research supports (Cooper, 2005; Vacca & Vacca, 2006) that text comprehension increases if readers respond to text during reading as well as after reading. In fact, our early data on marginalia align with such findings.

Interestingly, much of the data we have thus far is on students whose schools and teachers characterize them as functioning academically lower on literacy-related tasks than the majority of their grade mates. Early results suggest that marginalia shows promise as a strategy that encourages oral language development in preK and K, (i.e., increased story discussion among peers and vocabulary growth) and improves students' abilities to retell detailed stories sequentially. Marginalia facilitates written language skills in second graders as evidenced in the students' ability to read and answer correctly questions that require higher level thinking skills.

Moreover, students in this study perceive marginalia as an enjoyable activity, as exemplified when preschool students ask their teacher if they can use marginalia even when she does not assign it.

Improving reading comprehension for children with language-related learning issues is the most difficult literacy skill to facilitate. Successful interventions for such

difficulties are limited; therefore, additional ones are sorely needed. Marginalia appears

to be a strategy that students find enjoyable and, therefore, choose to use. Such activities

hold promise for learners and their teachers.

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