ATTACK OF THE KILLER BABY FACES: GENDER SIMILARITIES IN THIRD-GRADE WRITING

JAY SIMMONS

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Summary:

Although we have read about the gender differences found in the classroom, this article discusses some of the gender similarities that can be observed. Simmons created a writing workshop for his students where they would spend 45 minutes daily writing on topics of their choosing. The students would then devote 20 minutes of sharing their stories with their peers twice a day. Through this writing workshop, Simmons observed some similarities in writing styles of his male and female students and discusses two; how his students used popular culture as a basis for their stories and how they wrote their stories to elicit reactions from their audience using shock and humor. In his writing, Simmons uses examples from the short stories that his students compiled over the year to demonstrate the similarity in student’s writing across gender lines.

Simmons begins by listing some of the gender differences seen in writing styles but goes on to explain the similarities in writing across gender lines that he has observed in his classrooms. The author discusses two main similarities that he observed in his student’s writing. The first similarity that he observed was his student’s use of popular culture to scaffold their stories, imitating movie or video game plots. Simmons observed that his female students began the trend of listing popular culture possessions but that boys soon followed, crossing gender lines. He then discusses how listing popular culture possessions transformed into an imitation of pop culture which was then manipulated to create story structure and character development. As his students progressed, they were able to build their writing by using popular culture as a starting point.

Simmons also observed that both his male and female students used shock value and humor to appeal to their audience. The example he gave in the beginning of his work is an example of how one of his male students used violence as a way to elicit different reactions from his male and female peers. This particular student wrote about how he and his friend were attacked by baby faces falling out of the sky as they were swimming in a pond. The baby faces in his story refers to the baby face dolls that three of his female classmates had been bringing to
school daily. He then describes how his friend stabbed one of the baby faces in the head but was unable to kill it. The boys in the classroom shared a laugh at the girls’ expense while the girls insisted that their classmate was being inappropriate. When the girls argue that that the boys are just being “sick”, one of the male students argues back that “girls do sick things in their stories, too” (118) and reminds the girls of when one of the female students wrote a story about playing in a toilet. Simmons goes on to discuss how both his male and female students have used humor and shock as a way to draw out reactions from their classmates.

Simmons argues that popular culture should be allowed in the classroom because children use it as a way to scaffold their stories. He observed that although some stories were violent, students were able to transform the violence, humor, and shock into classroom dialogue that became “less violent and more literate” (119) He also goes on to discuss how his students began reading like writers. He observed that both boys and girls began reading as a way to write better. His students also began developing their own voices and plots but that girls and boys tended to look to different genres of writing, girls focusing on relationships and boys focusing on adventures, as a starting point for their own writing. He also discusses how both his students were able to integrate curriculum into their stories. For example, while learning about quilting, the girls began incorporating quilting in their stories. He concludes that the student’s stories “became as shocking or as funny or as valid as the gruesome adventures of the superhero, and the students brought their sometimes silly, sometimes rude, third-grade popular culture to bear on the task of creating a higher, more inclusive literacy.” (122)

How you can use this in your essay:

There are various ways to use this article as support for the second major essay. The article, “Attack of the Killer Baby Faces: Gender Similarities in third-grade writing” by Jay Simmons evaluates both similarities and differences in gender communication. The article can therefore be used to formulate a thesis that compares and contrasts gender differences in communication. The article can particularly be used to compare the similarities in female and male writing formats in the classroom. It can be used to define the different writing characteristics of each gender and consequently demonstrate how their individual gender influences the way they express themselves through writing. The article can also help develop ideas regarding who or what is responsible for the learning of our gender roles. According to the article, one major influence in gender and writing is pop culture. Simmons explains that, “in the
third-grade class, girls and boys used popular culture at first to list, them to imitate and transform, and finally to manipulate as a medium for story structure and character development.” (118) The influences shown can also be incorporated into the essay to discuss how gender manifests itself in the classroom and the individual. More importantly, the article can be used to answer who should address the problem of the gender gap and how it should be addressed. Crossover, a system used to close the gender gap and widen the communication level amongst the two genders can be developed to illustrate the responsibility that instructors have to close the gender gap. Allowing the crossover method permits the students to use non-stereotypical methods to express themselves through their writing. With these communication methods in mind, one can use this article to explain how instructors can in fact help bridge the gender gap. According to the article, other important methods used to bridge the gender gap are sharing gender-based techniques, small single-sex groups, large mixed group interaction, sharing sessions, and re-creating author’s works.

Topics/Supportive Quotes:

- Differences among male and female communication:
  “Freedman also noticed gender patterns in the writing of her students. Girls wrote more about friendship, themselves and their families, and school life; while boys more frequently wrote adventures and factual accounts.” Pg. 116
  “…boys choosing the technological subjects and the girls focusing on more domestic activity.” Pg. 121

- Similarities among male and female communication:
  “Both girls and boys wrote stories about their classmates and joke books.” Pg. 116
  Students of both sexes also incorporated their favorite writers and curricular topics into their pieces. Finally, by the end of the year, girls and boys merged the talents of both genders into a higher form of literacy,” Pg. 117
  “…girls and boys both aimed at audience reaction, often using argument and shock, (and they)…also incorporated their favorite writers and curricular topics into their pieces.” Pg. 117
  “…girls and boys drew heavily on popular culture in their writing…” Pg. 117
• “In the third-grade class, girls and boys used popular culture at first to list, then to imitate and transform, and finally to manipulate as a medium for story structure and character development.” Pg. 118
• “…students use their culture to script and scaffold their stories…” Pg. 119
• Influence on Writing:
• “Boys and girls in the class used popular culture to scaffold their stories, the characters beginning as dolls or action figures and the plots imitating video games or horror films.” Pg. 116
• “…both girls and boys both aimed at audience reaction, often using argument and shock.” Pg. 116
• “…boys use superheroes to give them a sense of control over their world…” Pg. 118
• “In fact, both the boys and the girls tried to use shock value for audience appeal.” Pg. 118
• Gender apparent in the classroom and how it should be addressed and by whom?:
• “Teachers should allow popular culture into their classrooms, despite the goal of breeding good taste and the dicta of such writers…” Pg. 119
• “I let the girls bring their dolls to school, much to the dismay of some parents who fear I am encouraging stereotypical roles. I decide to continue to ignore political correctness and permit imaginary gore…” Pg. 116
• See left column on Pg. 117: Info on Writing Workshop
• “My third graders transformed argument, violence and shock into a classroom dialogue that became less violent and more literate over time.” Pg. 119
• Formation of groups in classrooms (right-hand column): Pg. 119
• “I initially tried to mix the groups but realized that students’ work and behavior suffered from their resistance.” Pg. 119
• “The class became the social context of their discourse in that they knew the habits, preferences, and judgments of their audience and they wrote with the purpose of pleasing or shocking that audience.” Pg. 122
• “…and the students brought their sometimes silly, sometimes rude, third-grade popular culture to bear on the task of creating a higher, more inclusive literacy.” Pg. 122