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Dialogue Journals as a Vehicle for Preservice Teachers to Experience the Writing Process (I Like Him; Should I Tell Him at Recess?)

Mary Ann Wham
Susan Davis Lenski

Basic to the tenets of wholistic literacy instruction are the beliefs that reading and writing should be relevant to the learner, should serve real-life purposes and, consequently, should be meaningful (Goodman, 1986). Dialogue journals, described as written conversations between two or more people over an extended period of time (Staton, 1988), fit this description. Communication within a dialogue journal is informal and focuses on topics of mutual interest. They provide an arena for young students that is risk-free and empowering as new readers and writers are encouraged to use their invented spelling and to learn about literacy in an integrative manner (Bode, 1989). Dialogue journals serve as bridges between spoken conversation and written expression and help students develop an awareness of the real purposes of reading and writing (Gambrell, 1985). In addition, these journals provide a forum for sharing ideas, developing literacy skills and

enhancing participants' abilities to interact on paper in a warm and human way.

Traditionally, dialogue journals have been used within a classroom for correspondence between teachers and students or between two students. As an instructor of two language arts classes composed of elementary education majors, I decided to combine the concept of dialogue journals with the traditional activity of letter writing between pen pals. During the first week of the semester, the students in my classes were introduced to the dialogue journal project. My thought was that this project would serve several purposes. First of all, despite more than a decade of emphasis on the writing process, many of my elementary education students received their early education in traditional classrooms where a focus on written products was the accepted norm. They had been taught to read and write by traditional methods and consequently regarded these methods as the appropriate way to teach. A part of their schooling experience had been the development of the mindset that a good teacher corrected all spelling and grammatical errors made by pupils. Many of the language arts students believed it to be the teacher's responsibility to teach students to produce compositions that are error free (Crowhurst, 1991). Consequently, few future teachers are initially able to look beyond their pupils' errors to the meanings that the youngsters are attempting to convey.

Although we had talked at length about process writing within the language arts classes, this project seemed likely to make process writing come to life by supporting the approach in a variety of ways. Students would assume ownership over their writing rather than just writing to complete a class assignment. Students would be writing for a genuine audience, their elementary pen-friends. They would also experience peer editing when they read each others' journal

entries prior to sending them to the elementary school participants. In addition, these future teachers who were learning about literacy would have the opportunity to integrate and apply their knowledge through reflecting, analyzing and responding to the written work of real elementary children.

For the elementary students, the journal project would also provide valuable educational opportunities. They, too would experience sharing their thoughts with another person and would be encouraged to grow in their abilities to communicate effectively through writing. In addition, the journal would provide a risk-free environment where they could practice their emerging literacy skills and experiment with writing for an appreciative audience.

Subjects

Eighty-seven elementary students who were residents of a small midwestern community participated in the project in conjunction with the members of two language arts methods classes at a local university. All of the elementary students attended an elementary school where the overall teaching atmosphere can best be described as traditional. A few of the teachers in the school, however, were beginning to move in the direction of wholistic instruction and those who were contacted for the project were eager to experience an aspect of process writing.

Implementation

During the first week of the semester, the students in my language arts classes were introduced to the pen-friend project. They were asked to bring a bound composition book to class to use for corresponding with an elementary student. Every language arts student was randomly paired for correspondence with at least one first or second grader. The names

of the elementary student and the university student partners were placed on the fronts of the journals. The university students initiated the first journal correspondence by writing an introductory letter in which they introduced themselves and described the project. They also included questions such as *Do you like school?* and *What is your favorite book?* in order to provide some structure for the first responses from their elementary pen pals. The journals were delivered to the elementary school and the project was underway.

Between twelve and fifteen pen-friend correspondences were exchanged weekly throughout the semester. The language arts students eagerly awaited the weekly journal entries from their elementary counterparts and enjoyed sharing many of their journal letters with their classmates.

During the course of the semester, the future teachers used the journals to explore various developmental aspects of literacy which were apparent in the writings produced by their young friends. One focus of investigation was the varieties of invented spellings that the children produced. On several occasions in the language arts classes, we put large sheets of butcher block paper around the room and listed examples of the various stages of spelling development that we were able to identify in the journal entries. As the months went by, the class noticed that many of the first grade children appeared to be moving from a phonetic stage of spelling construction toward the transitional stage (Gentry, 1981), and several of the second graders were beginning to use the conventional spellings of words.

The future teachers were also able to note differences in the quality of the journal entries produced by the children. As they wrote weekly in their journals, the children's sentences became longer and their paragraph formations gradually

improved. The language arts students were careful to avoid stilted, unnatural writing when they made a journal entry and frequently were able to provide models of conventional spelling and sentence formation for their young correspondents. During the 15 to 20 minutes spent writing in the journals in the language arts classes, it was not uncommon to overhear such questions as *How do you spell armadillo?* or *Read this. Is this a complete sentence?* as these students also experienced the peer-editing phase of the writing process.

On several occasions I interrupted the interactions of my language arts students in order to draw their attention to what they were encountering. I urged them to place the importance and the pleasure of this activity into their "teacher memory banks" so that they would be able to provide a similar atmosphere in their future classrooms.

As the weeks went by the journal entries moved from safe, generic subjects such as hobbies, favorite television shows and physical descriptions to more personal topics, some of which were emotional in nature. The uninhibited writing of the first and second graders provided our class with a great deal of enjoyment. The students also learned a lot from their young friends about the changing family structure that many of the children were experiencing. There were frequent descriptions of non-traditional families that included weekend excursions to visit fathers and step-mothers or descriptions of outings that included "Mom's boyfriend" or "Dad's girlfriend." Sometimes the death of a pet was shared and on occasion, very personal questions were asked by our young correspondents. One first grader asked in her journal if her university pen-friend had a bank account and another, whose mother was expecting a baby, asked my student if she, too, were pregnant. Of course, the usual advice to the love-lorn was a subject of many exchanges. Six and seven year-olds

seemed well versed in the perils of mate selection and often sought advice from their older, more experienced pen-friends. "I like him. Should I tell him at recess?" was not an uncommon inquiry.

Figure 1

Responses (in percentages) to a questionnaire on writing enjoyment

	<i>Strongly agree</i>			<i>Strongly disagree</i>	
	1	2	3	4	5
I enjoyed the journal writing activity.	72	24	1	1	0
I had trouble knowing what to write about.	4	29	29	23	13
I thought about the mechanics of writing as I wrote in the journal.	26	48	19	4	1
I went back to revise/edit entries after writing.	33	35	12	12	6
I answered the questions my pen-friend asked in the journal.	90	5	2	0	1
I wrote about things that I thought would interest my pen-friend.	74	21	3	0	1
I wrote about things that happened in my everyday life.	53	33	10	1	1
I think this is a valuable activity for a language arts class.	84	13	0	0	1
This project helped me see the value of journal writing for elementary students.	72	24	1	1	0
I noticed some changes in my pen-friend's writing as the semester progressed (e.g., improved penmanship, longer entries, more questions).	17	30	38	9	4

The project was completed in early May and the conclusion was celebrated by a get-together in the campus dining room. Conveniently, the participating elementary students

attended a school only a few blocks from the university. One sunny May morning, 87 first and second graders and their teachers and aides arrived to meet their somewhat nervous university counterparts. After initial introductions were completed, fruit juice and cookies were served and the journals were presented to the elementary students as mementos of their pen-friend experience.

Figure 2

Responses (in percentages) to a questionnaire on journal enjoyment

	Grade 1		Grade 2	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
I enjoyed the journal pen-friend activity.	100	0	97	3
I looked forward to reading my journal.	100	0	97	3
I liked writing in my journal.	100	0	88	12
My pen-friend wrote interesting letters.	100	0	99	1
I liked meeting my pen-friend.	100	0	100	0
I would like to do this again next year.	100	0	97	3

Results

In an effort to evaluate the journal writing project, questionnaires were distributed to all of the participants. The questionnaires evaluated the project from a variety of standpoints as I was eager to determine if the expended effort was educationally worthwhile for future teachers and early readers and writers. Results of the questionnaires were very gratifying and support repeating the project in future semesters.

All 68 language arts students involved in the project were asked to evaluate it based on 10 statements to which they responded on a Likert scale from (1) *strongly agree* to (5) *strongly disagree*. The questionnaire and the percentage of responses to each statement was included in Figure 1. Ninety-six percent of the respondents enjoyed the journal project and 97 percent considered it a valuable activity for a language arts class. Thirty-three percent of the students however, indicated that they occasionally had trouble knowing what to write about, but an overwhelming 96 percent of the future teachers indicated that the project helped them see the value of journal writing for their future elementary students. Almost none of the undergraduates expressed any serious dissatisfactions.

The first and second grade journalers were also asked to evaluate the journal experience. A copy of their evaluation form and the percentages of their responses are included in Figure 2. It was interesting for the researchers to note that the first graders overwhelmingly enjoyed all aspects of the project while the second graders were a little more reserved. Because we wonder about their less enthusiastic responses, when we repeat the activity we plan to evaluate it with a combination of questionnaires and personal interviews.

Conclusion

The classroom teachers who collaborated with us asked that we repeat the project soon. They thought that their students were personally invested in their journals and had experienced in an unthreatening way the natural relationship between reading and writing.

The use of dialogue journals helps both future teachers and emerging readers and writers to develop their literacy skills. Through the dialogue journal experience, prospective

teachers are provided the opportunity to engage in writing in a purposeful context where they are able to examine the literacy skills and interests of their future students. For the elementary students, dialogue journals illustrated the national relationship between reading and writing with a focus on meaningful communication rather than only on mechanical correctness.

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