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Robert J. Nistler
Drake Univeristy

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Preservice teachers, sixth graders and instructors use dialogue journals to extend their classroom communities

Robert J. Nistler

Drake University

ABSTRACT

The use of dialogue journals has been studied extensively for its positive effect on children's personal adjustment, development of awareness for audience, understanding of others, increased motivation for purposeful writing, improved skill in conversing, and overall growth as writers. This manuscript extends that research to preservice teachers' exchanging journals with sixth graders. As a result of participation in this project, preservice teachers experienced the value of journal-based written and oral discourse activities for understanding and fostering their own social and academic development and that of their younger partners. University and classroom instructors' written observations and reflections shared from their own journals modeled what can be learned about one's students through systematic observations and reflections on them.

When this project began I had mixed emotions about doing it. I didn't really have any idea what I was going to talk to them [sixth graders] about or how I felt having someone model what I did. Also, the idea of sixth graders scared me. I learned quite a bit from this project. It allowed me to see that sixth graders weren't some monsters whose only purpose is to terrorize teachers. They are real kids with real lives. Some of the sixth graders were dealing with problems that were pretty tough to deal with.

I am a former sixth grade teacher now working as an associate professor in teacher education. The opening comments came from students in my undergraduate language arts courses. Because students making such comments generally had limited experiences working with sixth graders, I used an elementary classroom journal exchange in my language arts course as a means to help develop students' awareness of and an appreciation for the world of sixth grade children. The purpose of this article is to share the enthusiasm this project generated for journal writing among participants and the positive relationships developed across these different age-level groups. In addition I describe what I learned regarding instructor roles when conducting a dialogue journal exchange between undergraduates and

sixth grade children; emphasize the value of oral discussion as part of the written dialogue process; note what my students as preservice teachers learned about effective journal communications; and address the dynamic nature of the community that developed as sixth graders and undergraduates negotiated personal discourse beyond their own classrooms.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

As a sixth grade teacher I had consistently used dialogue journals to establish relationships with my students that went beyond what could be accomplished at the more public level of classroom talk. The use of dialogue journals in my university classrooms has been equally positive. I refer to Hall's (1994) definition of interactive writing to clarify my interpretation of "dialogue journals."

... writing involving the participation of two or more friendly correspondents who exchange meaningful and purposeful texts across an extended period of time. (p. 1)

The research literature is rich with examples of how dialogue journal activities contribute to children's personal adjustment (Staton, 1980), development of awareness for audience (Burk, 1989), understanding of others (Bryant, 1989), increased motivation for purposeful writing (Gambrell, 1985), improved skill in conversing (Bromley, 1993), and overall growth as writers (Yellin, 1987). This exploration, however, focuses more on the respondents, my students, and what this journal project taught them about being an effective adult partner in communication. In their study of the teacher's role as journal respondent, Hall, Crawford, and Robinson (1997) address the need for research that extends our knowledge of journal writing to include the area of teacher response.

... most studies of interactive writing have concentrated on what the students do. Such analyses miss much of the richness that comes from the interaction between two correspondents, thus drawing attention away from the task of being a successful adult partner in human communication. A two-sided examination of exchanges offers a more revealing, and ultimately more satisfying, account of interactive writing than one restricted only to the students' words. (p. 24)

In Spring 1992, I established a journal exchange between my undergraduate language arts students and a sixth grade class. Lara, the classroom teacher, had been involved in a similar classroom journal exchange with a fifth grade class when taking my course the previous year.

There were considerably more university students (44) than sixth graders (25), so we paired most of the university writers. Six university students worked one-to-one with sixth graders while 19 pairs worked with the remaining children. Lara and I agreed it was imperative to inform all participants how the journal activity was being carried out in each classroom and that both instructors play an active role as participants in the program. These were key elements we felt had been lacking in Lara's previous journal experience as a student in my class. Therefore, Lara and I exchanged a journal to share our observations and reflections of what occurred during and related to our class journal activities. An excerpt from my first entry on February 1, 1992, restated my interpretation of our planning conversations for content in our journal.

What I would like you to do is use this notebook to note how your children respond throughout this experience. Share anecdotes, trends, comments, attitudes, etc. Equally important share your feelings. How much work is this for you? Is it worth it? Would you do it again? What can teachers such as yourself gain from having your students involved in such an activity? What are your expectations at the outset? How does it feel being on both sides since you once were a journal partner and now are the teacher?

As part of her initial eight page entry of observations/reflections on 2/3/92, Lara shared her expectations.

I expect my kids to be motivated to write; I expect my kids to enjoy writing; I expect my kids to express their thoughts, feelings, and opinions through writing; I expect my kids to improve their verbal expression by sharing this experience with family members and other students; I expect my students to improve their ability to respond to another person through writing; I expect my students to look forward to the part of the day when they write in their journals; I expect my students to feel good about themselves because another human being is interested in what they have to say; and I expect my students to look back on this experience years from now and have a positive, happy memory of this stage in their education.

Lara's comments indicated to me that we were consistent in our thinking about the potential outcomes of this project and our commitment to it.

From Plans to Action: Semester One

My class met for 50 minutes three times per week on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. After class on Monday, I delivered journals to Lara's class in time for her language arts period. Her class kept the journals for the week and I picked them up before my class on Friday. On Friday, I distributed the journals to my students and provided them time to read and respond. For paired students, one usually wrote during class and the other took the journal over the weekend.

To prepare for our project, I required each individual or pair of my students to: 1) construct a journal (blank book) for use in written dialogue with a sixth grade student (I felt that the challenge of personally designing a book would engender a sense of ownership and convey to sixth graders a notion of what the students may be like); 2) identify themselves with a pseudonym; 3) explain the significance for their moniker; 4) include a brief autobiographical sketch; and 5) share an illustration that told something about them. I hoped that use of a self-drawn illustration would be informative, spark initial discussion with partners, and create artistic empathy in our sixth graders.

In order to encourage my students to reflect on their interactions with sixth graders, I asked them to routinely document their reactions. I collected, read, and responded to their entries in these reflective journals on four specific dates throughout the semester. These journals, my journal with Lara, and my field notes of observations of our in-class writing day became data sources.

The first time Lara received the journals, she allowed her students to browse through them. Then, names were drawn for order of individual journal selections. Lara allowed students to negotiate exchanges on their own terms. The following excerpt from our journal indicates her students' reactions.

Once they had their journals they immediately began thumbing through them, looking at the illustrations, reading the autobiography, and sharing information with their classmates and me. They were very excited! ... this was so fun to watch. (2/3/92)

Four days later my students exhibited an equal level of excitement when they received the journals for the first time and I noted.

My students have just received the journals. The room is buzzing. These students are so excited. After ten minutes, there's a lull as students get down to the business of writing. Now there is quiet talk. Individual students come to me to share things they've enjoyed about their partners. They share with each other as well. I wish you could see this. (2/7/92)

Two days later I added:

I had to stop writing during class because there was too much going on. I needed to let students share their experiences with me and I couldn't do that while writing. (2/9/92)

At the conclusion of the semester, sixth graders shared their perceptions of the journal activity through written essays. The following excerpt represents the early stages of the exchange.

After I finished reading my journal [the first time] I was kind of nervous because I didn't know what to write. For that reason is why it took me a while to write my first entry. As the weeks went by my journal partner and I wrote to each other. Every time it was time to get my journal I would get so excited. I guess it was because I wanted to see what Barbara had written.

During early exchanges, journal days always began with our students scrambling to get their journals. I was immediately struck by my students' high levels of activity, especially the great amount of discussion. Lara and I were no different. I was always eager to get to Lara's entertaining and informative entries regarding her students' journal behaviors. Initially, I read my class an excerpt from Lara's journal to share the atmosphere in her room during their journal time.

As the kids came into class all of them were asking, "Can we get our journals?" They found their journal and went to their seats. They immediately started thumbing through their journals. I observed many students counting how many pages the university students had written in response. Some compared the length of one partner's entry to the other. (Later during the class I shared the information about one responding in class and the other over the weekend). As soon as one little boy started reading, he looked up at me and said, "Ms. Lasater, you like the Cowboys don't you?" When I answered "yes," he said, "so does Amy." The manner in which he said this was like Amy was a friend he'd had for life and not someone who in reality he's never met! (2/10/92)

As I read this portion of Lara's entry to my students I could feel heightened interest. Her incredible attention to detail in her writing effectively characterized individual students and her class. I soon recognized that sharing Lara's written observations from our journal could become a window for my students into the sixth grade

classroom. As the semester progressed, I gradually increased the percentage of her entries I shared with my class. By her April 20th entry, I was reading aloud the entire text. I continued doing so for the duration of the project. the final entry in one of my student's dialogue journal represents the sentiment of nearly all 44 students regarding the value of sharing Lara's entries.

I enjoyed hearing Lara's anecdotes. They helped us make the vital connection between the individual we were writing to and his real life school situations. What I mean to say is that she gave us necessary background information: it made the experience more real. I suppose too, there is a measure of gratification for us to hear what we write mentioned in their class. It was important enough for our partners to take notice. Just hearing Lara talk of her students waiting in anticipation to read what we wrote added a depth to the experience.

Early in the semester, both Lara and I discovered that we underestimated the amount of class time we allotted to our journal activity. On February 10, Lara noted,

I can't believe how much can happen in the course of an hour! This has obviously taken longer than 10-15 minutes at the beginning of class. We spent nearly the entire hour with our journals today.

Students in my class loudly complained throughout the semester about the inadequacy of one 50-minute class period for reading, responding to and talking about their journals. The 38 students who were sharing a sixth grade partner were unhappy about splitting the limited time they could keep the journal with another student. Pairing my students became increasingly problematic. Students tended to overwhelm the sixth grade child with the amount of writing two partners generated and/or the difficulties university partners had getting equal access to a shared journal when we had so little time with them. When my students limited the amount they were writing, sixth grade partners often increased writing or at least became more responsive to what my students had written. In terms of partner relations, uncomfortable issues regarding access were typically resolved on an individual basis. Some students resigned themselves to the fact that working with another within our time constraints required extensive compromise.

Although we valued student talk during journal time we also were unsure how to deal with it. On February 11, Lara wrote,

My students come in, get settled right away, and immediately begin writing. They are used to this routine, but occasionally I have to remind them that this time is for written, not oral language ...

Within a week Lara displayed a changed view toward her students' talk.

There's no telling how long my students would have continued writing, but I couldn't stand it any longer and I wanted to hear from them, so I interrupted them after they had been writing for 25 silent minutes! Chris immediately tells me to wait — he is not ready to stop. When I tell them they can continue writing as everyone has the opportunity to share, all the kids cheer! (2/17/92)

By March 30, Lara reported that students were pulling desks together, or meeting in groups on the floor and elsewhere to discuss and share what had been written in their journals.

In my class, we eventually developed a routine in which I read aloud from Lara's journal. Next, informal and formal discussions developed as we discussed issues of interest to the entire class or to small groups. I described my role to Lara in an entry on February 16.

The major topic of conversation and writing continues to be journals. I have found that I am unable to write in class because there is too much interaction I miss out on when I'm tied to writing.

I never knew before class what form discussions would take or where they might lead. One day, Lara's entry about an angry parent (also a school board member) reacting to a misspelling in one of my student's entries sparked several days of discussion about current beliefs regarding spelling instruction, the politics of teaching, and audience and purpose in journal writing. Another time, elementary students wrote of an explosive argument among a number of sixth grade girls and our discussions turned to social issues of the classroom and the mercurial nature of adolescents. Initially, I was bothered by these intrusions on my instructional plans. However, I learned to appreciate these opportunities for empowering my students in their own learning. Consequently, our classes became more student directed as we responded to issues arising during journal conversations. I was learning to share my classroom, to allow students to control their agenda for learning. In turn, many students expressed an increased ownership in their learning as expressed in the following.

The thought of the journals scared me at first. I was not sure what I would have to say to a sixth grader. I also

worried about whether or not I would have or make time to respond in the journal. I have not, at least in the past, been real big on journals. Another aspect of my attitude that changed was the way I saw journaling itself. Like I said I have not been one to take initiative to do a journal. I believe that because we were not required to write in the journal every day helped. I found myself looking forward to Tuesdays for that very reason. My thoughts about time changed also. I did not know if I would have time; what a shock to me when I found myself staying up till all hours just to write in my journal or putting off other homework to do it first. What I found most surprising about the journal was how free it was. We were pretty much allowed to write whatever we thought appropriate. This was also the way my partner felt, from what I can gather, because he was very open. I enjoyed this part of our activity most I think.

My students and I also learned to better understand community from a performance perspective as a result of involvement in this project. Lewis (1995) challenges the existence of an idealized classroom community that is expected to serve as a unified learning community where students can take risks, ask questions, share and respond in a supportive environment where students can share their voices equitably in talk and writing about texts. Instead, along with Kambrelis (1995) and others, Lewis views community from a performance perspective in which norms and expectations evolve through negotiation among participants. Lewis states,

... contexts (including classrooms) are not static social facts or representations but construction zones or performative inventions negotiated by the participants. As such, they are heterogeneous and negotiable. This is crucial because it is within these construction zones that socialization and learning occur and individuals claim particular kinds of social and cultural practices and identities (p. 150).

Within this construct of community all participants in this journal project learned about the constructive nature of shared community development. The following excerpts from my journal document my observations of students constructing their own knowledge about who their sixth grade partners were as writers.

We continue to learn to differing degrees just what we expect from journaling experiences. More and more of my students are beginning to realize that they have unrealistic expectations. Unlike last week, they seem to be coming to terms with accepting who their writers are and appreciating what they are receiving in the way of entries. They still

question and wonder about length and depth of entries, but after a class discussion of such, they've looked at such problems in a new light. It's really exciting for me to watch right now because my students are so visibly trying to make sense of what they are experiencing — emotions, learning and the insecurity of dealing with the unfamiliar — almost groping their ways through this. It makes it hard to stay in the shadows and not tell them — think this way, share this, and so on. (3/8/92)

We are coming to value your students' entries for what they are, notes reflective of the early stages of developing relationships. We now realize that your students are learning what it means to use the medium of writing to try and test out a friendship. This is not an easy process, especially when limited to our means of communication. In any case, I find it to be very valuable for my students to experience the boundaries of journals — to see how important they are in this setting, yet how potentially beneficial they might be in a classroom setting. (3/29)

My thoughts were supported by students in oral discussions and journal entries such as the following.

I've gotten used to activities that are idealized, and theory based. Our activity [journal project] was a very real experience that I wasn't quite prepared for. I can not say for sure that I influenced my partner's writing, but she definitely affected my writing, and my naive notions. I learned that corresponding with a younger person is hard work. My inexperience with actual students hadn't prepared me for the give and take that is necessary.

At the end of our semester, Lara and I coordinated a picnic so our two classes could meet. Both classes convinced us of the need to do so and it turned out to be a very enjoyable gathering.

Refining the Process: Semester Two

Lara and I were very encouraged by the positive outcomes of our initial semester of sharing journals. Consequently, we decided to continue the project for the fall semester. I made some structural changes to my class schedule to capitalize on what I had learned from our first journal experience. Most exciting for me to realize was that students were more apt to take charge of their own learning due to the way journal experiences brought them into contact with so many real classroom issues. Therefore I changed from three 50 minute class sessions to two 90 minute sessions so I could devote one class day to a combination of writing workshop and journal activities.

Other changes I planned included reading aloud Lara's entire weekly entry in our journal and minimizing the number of my students who would be paired with one sixth grader. Again, my students created journals as they had the previous semester.

Similar to our initial semester, we struggled with sixth graders' initial attempts to write, especially the uneven nature of these attempts as they varied across students and time. The following comment from one of my students and then a sixth grade student demonstrate how learning was negotiated beyond the written text.

I read through the first journal entry that my partner had written ... It lead me to believe that we had nothing in common and I was sure that we would have a hard time writing to one another. My prophesy came true. About halfway through the semester he started writing about his journaling experience last semester and decided that he wanted us to meet. He included his phone number and asked if I was interested in meeting. I was really dreading making that phone call. After all, if we couldn't think of what to write to one another, what were we going to talk about on the phone?! I told him I would call though, and I asked him to warn his family. I was so surprised by our conversation. He talked nonstop for forty-five minutes. We decided to meet at the 7-Eleven next to his school. We decided that we would go to his house and get his kite and then go to the park. Brandan lives with his mother and his grandparents and I was able to meet everyone. Our afternoon together lasted for about three hours and it was great fun! A couple of weeks have passed now since my first meeting with Brandan. Both of our letters have gotten longer as well as our phone conversations. At our last meeting that was held in the park [with our classes] we decided that we would like to continue writing.

About the eighth entry we decided to meet at 7-Eleven on Halloween. This was probably the most exciting moment of the experience. I loved the experience [journaling] so much that Sonya and I are still journaling by bringing our journals back and forth between our houses. During the two months of the journaling I gained a good friend and lots of memories. I am really glad I did the journaling.

Reading Lara's journal aloud was once again an important source of information for my students. The resulting class discussions helped us make sense of this experience and sharing our stories developed our understanding of negotiated community. During the semester, I became more aware of the breadth of our journal community as a number of sixth graders visited with my students outside of the school settings. Beyond the 7-Eleven example,

crossage partners attended each others' sporting events, went to movies, or met for lunch. Parents often read their children's journals and some even took turns writing in them.

I also became more cognizant of the impact of this project on my students' understanding of and attitudes toward writing as the following journal excerpts demonstrate.

I was able to watch Jesse grow in his approach to writing. The mechanical changes in his writing were often subtle, while the changes in length were sometimes dramatic. This experience gave me new insight into the development of a writer. [She spent the rest of the paper specifying these insights in great detail.] This activity helped me to realize the importance of providing meaningful writing experiences where there is no stress, pressure, or grade. To create writers we first have to provide a risk-free comfortable environment and journals do that.

Turning It Over to Students: Semester Three

The project continued during spring semester. Earlier this year, Lara's class asked to coordinate the project by creating the journals. Lara worked with her students during this process and on February 16, I distributed 31 journals to my 31 students. Unlike previous semesters, I did not deliver the journals to the school. Instead, upon their insistence, four of my students shared the job of delivering the journals to the elementary school office on Thursdays after our class. Two of Lara's students took them from there to her classroom. They kept the journals over the weekend and my students picked them up again Tuesday mornings before our class.

Other than greater student control over the management of our journals, there were no major differences in the outcomes of the project. We continued to value the opportunities we were getting to directly learn about sixth graders as represented by the following.

I was very surprised at the intensity of my journal partner's entries. Many of his thoughts were private and personal. Because his entries were so thought provoking I felt an enormous responsibility when writing to him. I had to think carefully before writing because I wanted my answers to be appropriate for the situation. This surprised me more than anything else. It took a considerable amount of time to answer his questions. There was the realization that my journal partner was serious about his questions and deserved serious answers in return.

We broadened our understanding of journals as a vehicle for generating relevant written and oral discourse as the following students noted.

It was nice for me to see first hand that yes, kids can and do enjoy writing. Brandon's writing also reinforced what I had heard in class — that perfect spelling and handwriting are not crucial to communication of thought! I clearly see that the priority must be the communication of thought.

... a real sense of trust developed between us. She got to where she would share her most private thoughts with me. I began to feel like a true friend. I never gave advice or judgment, I just let her talk. My goal was to provide a safe feeling for Terry so she could have somewhere to think out loud in security. I could feel my emotions about the whole project changing the longer it went on. I started looking forward to reading the journal. This experience gave me the chance to get to know a sixth grader and not to become scared of them.

Lastly, once again we became an evolving learning community that extended beyond our classroom environment. This final journal excerpt illustrates how students learned to work with their journal partners rather than trying to impose a preconceived set of standards on them as writers and individuals.

This has been beneficial for me because as a future teacher, I need to be able to read the needs and wants of my students. Ross' entries forced me to get down on their thinking level and realize that they think in a different way than I do. Also, males (old and young) communicate differently than females (old and young). The communication, or lack of, is something for me to work with as I become a teacher.

CONCLUSIONS

The catalog description of *Language Arts in the Elementary School* stated that the course was designed to acquaint pre-service teachers with the theory, assumptions, and methods associated with developing language arts skills in elementary students. When I first began using a journal exchange for this course, I believed that it could play an important role helping my students: 1) understand how journals can foster children's growth as language users; 2) understand the nature of children at a particular grade level; and 3) discover the utility of this medium for establishing a personal student/teacher relationship. I was unprepared, however for the broad impact our journal experience had on my students', Lara's and my understanding about the socio-cultural nature of classroom communities and the important roles oral and written dialogue play in these settings.

My students began to glimpse the world of sixth-grade students — the uneven nature of peer relationships, their interests, attitudes, concerns, differentiated levels of social and academic maturity, and abilities to interact with others. Most notably, the university students were surprised by sixth graders' descriptions of every day occurrences that seemed more challenging than those which they remembered experiencing at that age.

Often, university and elementary students were frustrated as they tried to establish a personal relationship through dialogue journals when no face to face interaction accompanied the activity. Consequently, as Rankin (1992) also discovered, the importance of peer conversations became increasingly apparent to Lara and myself each semester. As this project evolved, I attempted to compensate for this lack of physical contact. I moved from selective sharing of Lara's entries with my students to sharing her entire texts. My students learned much about sixth graders' reactions to journal entries through these oral readings. This filled in the gaps created when sixth graders were less "talkative" in their entries. In addition, Lara's careful recording of observations and reflections became a model of what teachers can learn about students through systematic observations and reflections on them. Lara epitomized kidwatching.

Although not specifically addressed in this article, I found that the value of dialogue journals: 1) for motivation to write; 2) as a source for modeling writing; 3) as a means for learning about student writing abilities as reported in the literature was also evident during this project. More importantly, I have noted that over time, students in elementary and university settings took increasing control of journal activities. Class time allotted for writing and the accompanying discussion became the students' domain as they made clear to their instructors that scheduled and unscheduled blocks of time were preferable to one short time period for writing and talking. I rediscovered the important role of oral language for negotiating and constructing knowledge. The sharing of this oral language across the sixth grade and university communities was mediated through instructors' written accounts shared orally with students.

University students reported that dialogue journals, as experienced in this project, were influential for affecting what they hoped and expected to implement in their own classrooms. Our journal activities provided university students expanded opportunities for learning about the whole child and enhanced opportunities for oral discourse, even when the partners were separated by distance. Undergraduates experienced the value that discourse activities provided for understanding and fostering student social and academic development and constructing a shared community. They learned, as stated by Wells and Wells (1992) that, "In a very important sense, education is dialogue."

During this project, I was continually reminded of the value of student ownership in learning. Although Lara and I provided the

framework for the journal project, it was the students who shaped the personality to the journal activities. Lara's and my written journal exchange and the ongoing oral and written feedback from students resulted in program adjustments which gradually moved Lara and me to the periphery rather than the center of our discourse community. We learned that this was the best place for us to be.

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Robert J. Nistler is a faculty member in the Department of Education at Drake University, in Des Moines Iowa.