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An Authentic Literary Experience: Sixth-graders and Preservice Teachers in Shared Response

Delores E. Heiden
Pamela Schmitt

November 8, 1990

Dear UWL Student,

*My name is Mindy and I'm in the 6th grade. Right now I'm reading Ramona the Brave by Beverly Cleary. I liked it because of how Ramona acts like me toward my older sister. I like the part where Ramona and Beezus are in the park and some boys start calling Beezus "Jesus Beezus." I also liked how the author describes the characters. I give this book ****.*

Sincerely,
Mindy

P.S. I'm on page 20.

November 15, 1990

Dear Mindy,

My name is Doug and I'm a senior at the university. I'm glad you chose a book by Beverly Cleary. She is one of my favorite authors. The two little sisters in this book remind me of Peter and his little brother in Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing. I agree with you; the episode in the book was funny. It was interesting to see how upset Beatrice got when the boys called her "Jesus Beezus." Do you think she overreacted? Why? I have some free time now and will finish reading Ramona the Brave. I can't wait to see what happens next!!

Another student,
Doug

These entries are taken from the reading response journal of a sixth grade student. Response journals —often

called reading logs — are written conversations about books. When students' journals are shared with teacher or peers, lively dialogue about plot, characterization, favorite authors, and personal response to literature may ensue. In this instance, the student's journal was shared with a pre-service teacher. Through a joint effort between a middle school teacher and a university professor, reading response journals were expanded into each other's classroom. Students and teachers were equally delighted with the results, gaining new insights about reading and writing. In this article, both dimensions of the journal exchange will be explored through the observations of a classroom teacher and a college professor as their students connected with one another in an authentic literary experience.

Pam's perspective

In the fall of 1990, I implemented a new method of teaching reading for my heterogeneous group of fifth and sixth grade students. Instead of using the basal reading text, my students were now involved in the reading workshop method adapted from Nancie Atwell's book, *In the Middle* (Atwell, 1987). Atwell states that if adolescent students are to appreciate literature, the first step is allowing them to exert ownership and choose the literature they will read. I agreed with Atwell's philosophy; if I wanted my students to become readers I must break away from traditional ties and let them choose their own books.

The next step in the reading workshop method was to introduce the reading response journals to my students. As an integral part of the Reading Workshop approach (Atwell, 1987), response journals have gained wide acceptance in classrooms where teachers are adopting more holistic approaches to reading and writing (Graves, 1989; Wollman-Bonilla, 1989). These dialogue journals were spiral

notebooks given to each student to write their responses, feelings, questions, and reactions about what they were reading. At first, children would write to me every week and I would respond back to them. I encouraged students to tell me not just about the summary of the book, but to go deeper into the plot, character, and even theme. I advised them to date each entry, and write freely instead of concerning themselves with spelling or punctuation. I also explained how to write book titles with capital letters, to underline these titles, and finally to sign their names to each entry.

After a few weeks of writing their entries only to me, I expanded the journals so that students wrote to their classmates. During this time, I observed an increased interest in reading; the students were very enthusiastic about conveying their opinions to each other. It was exciting for me as a teacher to see my students react so positively. Therefore, I decided to present my ideas on the reading workshop at our local reading conference. It was at this meeting that a university professor approached me indicating that she too was doing journals with her college students, and perhaps the two classes could write back and forth. After discussing the logistics of this project, we agreed to start our journal exchange between my middle school students and her reading methods students in the second quarter.

I went back to my class with news that they were going to write to university students in their dialogue journals. For their first entry they would write about themselves, their families, and about their book, using the following book log information which I adopted from a reading series (Pearson, et al., 1989). These open-ended sentences were interwoven into their own language, helping the students to reflect at a deeper level of understanding. I wanted more than just a general statement of whether or not a child liked a

particular book. Four open-ended sentences were used in my dialogue journals: 1) *This book made me think...*; 2) *I especially liked the way the author...*; 3) *Some words or phrases I liked in the book are...*; 4) *The part on page ____ was interesting because...* On the day when the first exchange was to be held with university students all my students had their journals on my desk, ready to be picked up by the university teacher. A few days later, I returned the journals to my students. Their excitement was contagious as the entries below indicate.

November 8

Dear UWL Student,

Hi, I'm Sarah. I'm eleven and in sixth grade. Right now I'm reading Weekend by Christopher Pike. At first it was boring, but now I just love this book! It's gotten more exciting. I can barely put it down. It makes me think about what it will be like when I'm in my senior year of high school... I like the way the author gives background on the people in the book. Now I think I'll tell you about the way I wish my life to be. I want to be a doctor for the deaf. My best friend Lindsey is deaf. I want to be a doctor at the Institute for the Deaf in Washington D.C. or in the Twin Cities.

OMS Student,
Sarah

November 15

Dear Sarah,

Hi Sarah! My name is Jackie, and I'm a senior at the University. I totally agree with you that Weekend is boring so far. It's moving too slow and I'm having a hard time paying attention! Hopefully, it will get better like you said.

I want to tell you how great I think it is that you want to be a doctor, and I think it would be very interesting to work with deaf people. Keep up the good work in school, future Dr. _____.

Jackie

Delores' perspective

I was seated in a session at the fall conference of our local reading council, listening to presenters Pam Schmitt and Judy Stodola tell about the inner workings of their reading and writing workshop, imagining how I could convey

their first-hand experiences to my reading methods undergraduates. As I listened to their excellent presentation, it occurred to me that substituting a real-world experience for a vicarious one would be of the most benefit to my students. After the presentation, I made my way up to Pam. Would she be willing to have her students participate in a reading response journal exchange with my class? She would, indeed; and so it began.

From the first, my university class appeared enthusiastic about the project. We had been simulating some workshop components – SSR time and journal writing time had been built in to the start of alternate class sessions – and the students and I were sharing dialogue journals (Bode, 1989) on a rotating basis. As Cooter and Reutzel (1990) point out, since journal writing plays such an important role in elementary schools, preservice students need to have experience with the theoretical structure and mechanics of journal writing. These authors recommend that the methods instructor model the procedure for preservice students. But the chance to respond to “real live kids” was what my undergraduates really wanted. Bushkie and Ford (1989) relate the success of their dialogue journal exchange between university undergraduates and Chapter 1 students. They found that their journal project helped university students “discover the general value of writing in the reading program and the specific value of using journals” (p. 17). In contrast, Pam and I were particularly interested in an exchange of reading response journals, in which students would express personal response to literature.

The plan was simple. I would obtain a list of sixth-grade students and the books they were currently reading from Pam, and my students would sign up for a partner. Once matched, the sixth-grader/university student pair

stayed the same throughout the course of the project. Fortunately, class sizes were nearly the same; in one instance, two university students wrote as a team to one sixth-grader. With Pam's list, and the assistance of our IMC and local children's library, I gathered the set of books my class would need. During SSR time the university students would read to keep pace with their sixth-grade partner, and then respond to the child's journal. In between journal exchanges, Pam and I kept in touch by phone and during brief moments when I stopped at her building to pick up or deliver journals. It all worked most smoothly when the partners maintained a correspondence about one book for several exchanges; it became a bit more hectic when a sixth-grader started and abandoned several books in turn. But that, of course, is exactly what one should expect, and my students took it in stride.

Pam's observations

For the next two months, my students wrote to their university reading pals, each time anxiously waiting for their responses. Since both middle school student and the university counterpart were reading the same novel, both individuals could relate personal feelings to the literature. One of my frustrations as a teacher had been not relating a personal reaction to their novels simply because I couldn't read every book. The students were having the "dinner table talk" that Nancie Atwell stressed in her book, *In the Middle*. The entries took on a unique flavor of conversation between two students who discussed not only what they were reading but also what was happening in their own lives. I soon began to see some new categories of responses. The students were relating events in the books to events in their own lives. Two examples of this personal experience response follow.

Dear Lisa,

I am reading One-Eyed Cat by Paula Fox, too! I'm about half done with it already. It's really good and when I start reading a good book, I can't put it down! This book really has a lot of emotion. I feel sympathy for his mother. She is so ill. I also feel sorry for Ned. My mom is very strong and I depend on her a lot. I can't imagine what it would be like if she were ill.

Mr. Scully reminds me of someone I know and care about very much. He is my neighbor and he is 84 years old. He lives in the apartment next door and he comes over to visit a lot. I think he is very lonely. We invite him over for supper a lot. You can really learn a lot from elderly people. Do you know any elderly people? (Maybe your grandparents?)

*Sincerely,
Heidi (university student)*

Dear Heidi,

I'm still reading One-Eyed Cat. It's getting a whole lot more interesting. I agree. This book does have a lot of emotion. I would be miserable if my mom was ill. Also Mr. Scully reminds me of someone I know, too. I know many elderly people such as my grandparents...

Lisa (middle school student)

Finally, in my observations I saw that both classes were learning from each other. The university students modeled effective questioning techniques, in-depth responses, and also correct usage, spelling, and punctuation. What really surprised me was that my fifth and sixth graders were modeling the process in writing reading response entries about books without giving summaries. The university students were responding also in their journal entries by using the same open-ended sentences that they learned from my students. Here are some examples of this modeling process at work.

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Dear UWL student,

My name is Eric. I'm in 6th grade. I'm reading The Beast in Miss Rooney's Room. By Patricia Reilly Giff. This Book mad me think about the time when my older friends moved up to a different pod. I like the way the outhor descibed all the new kids in his new class. There isn't a lot that I liked in it but the hole book is good so far. The part wen he

*go's to the assmeby it shows how imbarrest he is about his class. I give this book ***.*

*Your friend,
Eric (middle school student).*

P.S. I'm on page 55.

November 15

Dear Eric,

It is so nice to be able to write to you. I enjoyed reading The Beast in Ms. Rooney's Room by Patricia Reilly Giff. Richard, the main character, sure seems like a funny guy. He is smart, yet he needs extra help in reading. I think everyone needs a little extra help every once in awhile. Do you agree? I liked the part on page 46 when Richard and Emily become friends and agree that they want to try to get the banner for the "best class." Keep up on your reading and writing!

Your friend, Jennifer (university student)

Graves (1989) observes that children "become apprentices" when they write letters to their teachers; the children explore transactions with the adult and take steps toward understanding the literacy of adults. But teachers also need to know how to use letters to approach children, and in our project the university students were, in many ways, "apprentices" to the children. These preservice teachers were exploring transactions with children and beginning to understand the world of sixth-graders. Jennifer, a university student, pointed out that the experience gave her insights into how sixth-grade students write. And clearly, the experienced sixth-graders were excellent models for the adult learners. The structure and content of sixth-grade letters, especially in the ways they responded to story, were reflected in the letters of the university students.

Delores' observations

Pam and I both wanted authentic literary experiences for our students. For most of my university students, the workshop approach to reading and writing was far removed from the way they had been taught in elementary school. Rupert and Brueggeman (1986) point out that many college

students have been taught in traditional programs that often ignore the social aspect of reading. Experiencing the communicative atmosphere inherent in the reading and writing workshops was a real departure from the kind of program my students knew best. But their comments at the project's end indicated that the journal exchange had been both enlightening and meaningful for them.

Mark: The experience of handling a real situation was very valuable!

Jane: It gave us a chance to go through the process and see what it is actually like. It was a good experience.

Janna: I was impressed to see how children can be so excited about writing – especially to other people. I would try to replicate a similar situation with my class if possible.

Kirsten: This exchange was a great opportunity for us to see the process in action, rather than just hearing about it in class.

Shannon: In my past educational experience, I never had the opportunity to communicate through journals. I found it very worthwhile to experience it before being out in the field.

While the motivation for participation in the project was different for the university students than that of the sixth-graders, the older students shared many of the benefits realized by their younger counterparts. Simpson (1986), writing of her seventh graders' response journals, points out the benefit of communal sharing among fellow learners: "We experienced an appreciation of the contribution that each of us brought to the event. We valued the narrative, and we valued each other" (p. 47). There was strong evidence that the university students truly valued the narrative as much as they valued their young partners. Although my students really only needed to read enough of each book to be able to respond intelligently to the sixth-graders, they too became caught up in the literature. At the end of our project one university student returned Wilson Rawls' *Where the Red Fern Grows* with this note attached: "Sorry I did not get the book back sooner, but I wanted to finish it."

Suggestions

In reflecting on our experience, we saw some minor difficulties during the course of the project. Some suggestions for helping the journal exchange to proceed smoothly are given. 1) Anticipate minor problems. If a university student is absent, the professor or another student can step in to write that day's entry. If a child's journal somehow missed the exchange, the university student simply writes a letter to the student on a free choice of topic. The important thing is to make sure every child receives some correspondence in every journal exchange so that there are no hurt feelings. 2) Decide on a regular method of shuttling the journals between classroom and campus. In our case, Delores' more flexible schedule made it possible for her to pick up and deliver the journals during school hours. It does take time, but the results are worth it. 3) Communicate with one another. The telephone, notes, and quick consultations at drop-off time kept us working in concert. We had no pre-arranged schedule for the exchanges. When Pam's class was ready, the journals were picked up. 4) Have a common list of books for the exchange. One of our infrequent problems was not being able to provide the university student with a book that a sixth-grader was reading. Sometimes we had to ask that the sixth-grader send over his/her book so that the university student could get a look at it. A possible solution could be a pre-determined list of approximately 100 or more titles, available in both the sixth-grade classroom and the university IMC. The sixth-graders would be asked to select books from this list just for the duration of the exchange. The university students would be able to pick up the books themselves, and it would save a lot of hunting for titles. 5) Arrange for a meeting between the correspondents. At the end of the semester, the university class visited Pam's sixth grade classroom. The sixth-graders planned the visit unassisted. They took their guests on a tour of the building,

talked about themselves and their classroom, presented skits, and served refreshments. They had also made banners and a thank-you card. It was a wonderful finale to the whole experience.

Notes

1. Pam's sixth-graders are teaching a new class of reading methods students from the university during the current semester.

2. Tradebooks referred to in the article include:

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Cleary, B. (1975). *Ramona the brave*. New York NY: Scholastic.

Fox, P. (1984). *One-eyed cat*. New York: Dell.

Giff, P.R. (1984). *The beast in Ms. Rooney's room*. New York NY: Dell.

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