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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that the informal language of journals is very important. Language scholars such as J. Vygotsky (1962), J. Moffell (1968, 1982), P. Elbow (1973, 1982), and M. Shaughnessy (1977) believe that human beings find meaning through exploration in their own talking language. To add to the evidence in this area, a study conducted in an urban New Jersey School selected six third-grade students to engage in free written dialogue with their teacher; six other students wrote for the same period of time but not in dialogue. All the participants were of lower socioeconomic status; all could be classified as reluctant writers. Interestingly, results showed that dialogic journal writing did not enhance writing skills as compared to journal writing in the absence of a teacher. Dialogue with a teacher in a journal was not shown to be an effective means of instruction. (Includes 8 tables of data; contains 24 references and 2 appendixes of results.) (TB)

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USING DIALOGUE JOURNALS TO ENHANCE WRITING SKILLS

BY

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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted with twelve third grade students to derive whether or not written dialogue with the teacher during journal writing would be an effective technique to use in instruction with reluctant writers. One sample had written dialogue with the teacher during journal writing, while the other sample did not. The results did not show this to be an effective technique for use in instruction with reluctant writers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank Dr. Albert J. Mazurkiewicz (Chairperson of the Department of Communication Sciences at Kean College) for his assistance in helping me prepare this paper.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this paper to my husband, Ronald and daughters Ronda and Robin for their support, patience and understanding, and with whom I would love to share what I have achieved.

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Jerome Bruner (1966) states that learning is a collaborative venture between teacher and students. He feels that thought takes form in the shape of an internal dialogue, one that itself is a continuation of a dialogue with another. Not only the content of dialogue is important but the matter of style - its searchingness, honesty, concision and completeness. The dialogue journal makes it possible for students to recognize first, what it is that they already know, and then makes it possible to go beyond to things they do not know. In dialogue journal writing, the student focuses his thoughts, fusing them into a written language that involves a much more abstract and demanding process of talking to a more generalized other, rather than to just a specific person. This mode of writing bypasses all the pitfalls of articulate conversation.

The practice of interactive written conversation may go back to the beginning of writing itself with note passing among family members, fellow workers and students. The first

comprehensive study of interactive written communication in classroom setting began in the classroom of a Los Angeles teacher, Leslee Reed in 1979. In interviews done with Reed by Staton (1988), Reed states that using dialogue journals as a way of communication made her whole teaching year flow. She felt that the dialogue journals gave her a way to learn, especially in a multi-cultural setting. It helped her learn the problems of different cultures and different races trying to fit into the pattern of American life. It also allowed her a way to individualize work. She stated that a teacher could see if what she sensed as a teacher came through to the writer as a student. Although the dialogue journals are not graded in any way, the teacher can tell from the general tone of what the student wrote how well the student did in other subject areas. She feels that a lot of love goes into journals on both the students' and the teacher's part. Love, respect and mutuality of goals are the feeling that were developed for each other. The difference between conventional "monologue

journals" in which only the student writes and the on-going conversations between students and teacher, quickly became apparent in the interview with the students and the contents of the journal entries. The name "dialogue journal" suggested itself as a way to distinguish them from the more common personal journals. The corpus of dialogue journals from the 1979-80 class became the basis for the first study (Staton, 1982).

The dialogue journal project was a classroom event which emerged prior to explicit analysis and theories of research. However, the influence of many earlier and current theorists became part of the study. Some of the works that influenced this early study are Jerome Bruner, Vygotsky, Sylvia Ashton-Warner's **Teacher**, David Holbrook's **English for the Rejected**, Paulo Freere's **Pedagogy of the Oppressed**, **Letters to a Teacher** by the schoolboys of Barbiana. These early works spoke to the power of words used in interaction, especially the importance of personal literacy for the child. The early works also had an underlying conviction that literacy

must be used to liberate and empower, not to control or degrade. Since little research had been done prior to 1979, Jana Staton sought the help of Roger Shuy at Georgetown University who suggested ideas and guidance for analyzing text using sociolinguistic concepts and methods. Also Bud Mehan at University of California - San Diego and Pat Greenfield of UCLA provided help in applying methods for studying the interactional structure of conversation to the written ones. The completion and dissemination of the final report in 1982, encouraged the spread of dialogue journal use with children of all backgrounds and ages.

Research suggests that the informal language of journals is very important. Language scholars including Vygotsky (1962), Moffell (1968, 1982), Elbow (1973, 1982) and Shaughnessy (1977) are a few of the language scholars who felt that human beings find meaning in the world by exploring it through their own talking language - not the language of textbooks and teachers. Good examples of language can be found in daily

lunchroom conversations, telephone talk, informal letters, private dairies and personal journals.

However, research on the effects of journal writing on the writing skills of various populations is scant. Specifically, the use of journal writing in developing the writing skills of reluctant writers needs to be explored.

Hypothesis

To add to the evidence of this topic, the following study was undertaken. It was hypothesized that dialogue written in journals between teacher and students would not enhance the writing skills of the reluctant writers when compared to journal writing in the absence of dialogue with the teacher.

Procedures

The subjects used for this study were twelve randomly assigned third grade students between the ages of eight and nine years old who attended an urban school in New Jersey during a four-week period starting in mid-January 1995. They were of lower socioeconomic status, the majority receiving federal assistance. Most came from one parent head of household families.

Six students were randomly selected and assigned to the control sample and six students were randomly selected for the experimental sample. Both samples were allowed approximately fifteen minutes of free writing time each day. One sample maintained a written dialogue with the teacher, while the other sample wrote without any written dialogue with the teacher.

A pre/post comprehensive checklist on writing skills was completed on each student. One randomly selected day's entry from the first and last weeks of the period were used. The skills covered were capitalization, punctuation,

Definitions

It is important to define these terms so that misunderstanding does not result.

1. Dialogue Journal - The teacher and student respond to the journal through written conversation. Comments are often brief, informal, private and direct.
2. Personal Journal - Most often this is the first person diary format, but it is not limited to this. Some students mix diary entries with stories. Some students may use the structure of familiar stories to create original ones.
3. Teacher Response - Written comments that are genuine and personal responses that provide reading-writing models. Implicit in the written response is no correcting, red penciling, and no grading. Correct grammar or spelling is incorporated in the response based on errors the student made.

Results

After completing a four-week period of journal writing, the means scores of pre/post checklists on word usage, capitalization and punctuation, and the number of words written each week of 3K were compared to means of 3A.

Table I
Word Usage - Pre-Test

	Mean	Standard Deviation	t
3K	2.50	1.64	
3A	2.00	0.63	.70
NS			

Table II
Word Usage -Post-Test

	Mean	Standard Deviation	t
3K	1.53	1.22	
			.28
3A	1.67	.82	
NS			

Table III
Capitalization - Pre-Test

	Mean	Standard Deviation	t
3K	1.17	.75	
			2.04
3A	2.67	1.63	
NS			

While means differences existed between the samples in either direction, only Table III's data is approaching significance at the 5% level.

Table IV
Capitalization - Post-Test

	Mean	Standard Deviation	t
3K	1.33	1.03	.24
3A	1.50	1.38	
NS			

Table V
Punctuation - Pre-Test

	Mean	Standard Deviation	t
3K	3.67	2.80	.91
3A	2.50	1.38	
NS			

Table VI
Punctuation - Post-Test

	Mean	Standard Deviation	t
3K	2.17	.75	
3A	1.83	1.72	.43

NS

The t test results indicates that there was no significant difference between the samples in writing skills.

Table VII
Number of Words - Pre-Test

	Means	Standard Deviation	t
3K	191.83	7.50	
3A	233.67	52.36	1.17

NS

Table VIII
Number of Words - Post-Test

	Mean	Standard Deviation	t
3K	161.33	50.67	
			1.90
3A	222.50	60.56	
NS			

The t test results indicated that there was no significant difference between students that had written dialogue with the teacher and students that did not write dialogue with the teacher during journal writing time.

the teacher during journal writing time.

Conclusion

The hypothesis of the study that dialogue written in journals between teacher and students would not enhance the writing skills of the reluctant writer when compared to journal writing in the absence of dialogue with the teacher was supported by the findings and was accepted. Written dialogue with the teacher during journal writing was shown not to be an effective technique for use in instruction.

DIALOGUE JOURNAL: RELATED LITERATURE

Dialogue journal writing is the use of a journal for the purpose of carrying out a genuine writing conversation between student and teacher (Staton, 1987). Staton states that the interactive format of equal turns on the same topics is quite different from the traditional student personal journal. In the elementary school classroom, this practice also involves meaningful, functional reading and writing as a single whole, the same as speaking and listening is a seamless whole in oral conversation.

Dialogue journals offer interesting lessons for children to learn to read and write naturally. The two processes positively influence each other and both develop as a natural extension of children's desire to communicate (Applebee, 1977; Aulls, 1975). Falk (1979) feel that language, including reading and writing, "cannot be taught in the traditional sense; it must be learned through...extensive exposure to and practical experience with the use of language in actual, natural context and situations". Clay (1975) also believes that a writing program should

complement the reading program and that both should emphasize meaning. As the children read the teacher's responses, they must understand and integrate information to construct a coherent response. Through their own efforts the children gain an awareness of the basic tools a writer uses to communicate to an audience.

Dialogue journals (Hall and Duffy, 1987) help to link writing with oral language and make children's writing more spontaneous and natural by helping them to find their writing "voice". The teacher initiates the conversation by writing brief messages to students, who in turn read what the teacher has written and write a written response back to the teacher. The teacher then reads the comments and writes additional comments. Hall and Duffy (1987) suggest that teachers begin by making declarative statements about personal experiences rather than asking the students questions. Duffy found that when the students were asked questions, their answers were brief replies. However, when she write personal statements, the students responded more

spontaneously. Using this strategy, the teacher serves as a model of spontaneous writing, as well as an audience for the children's writing. Having an interested audience is a powerful motivator for writing. Noyce (1989) states that in addition to dialogue journals facilitating fluent, natural writing and motivating the writing process, written conversations have the additional advantage of providing children with valuable reading practice.

Grambell (1985) defines the role of the teacher as one who shares, comments, reacts, provides a model, answers questions, ask questions and most important of all, encourages children to express themselves in writing. The focus should be on communication. If a child misspells or uses a word incorrectly, the correct form should be used in the teacher's response. The child's written entry is never corrected. The teacher's response should motivate the child to respond and encourage written expression. The teacher can have a dramatic effect on the length and context of the child's writings.

In addition, Routman (1988) emphasizes the importance of questions, such as "What were you thinking when that happened?" to enhance critical thinking processes.

Vygotsky's theory (1978) that development of the child begins in social interaction with an adult as guide until the child internalizes the kind of help received from the adult and guides himself was the basis of a study done by Kreeft (1984). Kreeft's study showed that dialogue writing, in which two participants write back and forth "conversing" in writing incorporating the interactive aspects of language, can bridge the gap between two forms of communication and provide a natural means by which children can move from a skill they already know (face-to-face communication) to a new skill (unilateral sense-making in writing). The developmental progress of a six-grade student in four interactions chosen during the school year was followed. The progression was from writing recounts that shared knowledge with little bits of information, to explicitly interactive

writing that provided information in response to teacher questions to implicitly interactive writing in which he anticipates the teacher's questions and provides the information in the written dialogue over time. He writes first with active assistance from the teacher, but gradually becomes more independent, until he is writing narrative almost unassisted. The student applied skills that he had already acquired in mastery of oral communication to the task of writing. As he expanded the skills through practice, he began to write extended and coherent prose without the direct assistance of immediate audience feedback.

In the dialogue journal, the teacher and student can carry on a written dialogue at a different level than the regular dialogue that takes place in the classroom. According to Craig (1983), by making written comments in students' journals, asking questions and encouraging written response on the part of the student, the teacher can make the journal experience a two-way street and enter into conversation with the student

in a manner which may help the student think more deeply and respond more honestly. The frequent writing that takes place in dialogue journals helps promote students' writing fluency and the reading of teachers' comments provide valuable reading experience as well.

The dialogue journal functions in the classroom as a mode of personal and private communication between student and teacher. Some teachers regard the dialogue journals as a communicative event that realized in a tangible way these overall purposes. First, the journals provide daily opportunities to develop mutuality between teacher and student, increasing the shared understanding of experience, thereby maintaining the common values of respect, trust, and cooperation. Second, the journals should be a primary channel for self-expression, for giving one's opinions about events and expressing feelings openly. The third purpose of the journals is to provide the information students need to construct more socially mature, or more "rational", values, beliefs and attitudes about

oneself and one's actions in the world
(Staton, 1988).

Shuy (1988) feels that although the focus is on the written language of students and teachers in dialogue journals, it is appropriate to consider the oral language antecedents of writing in order to set the dialogue journals in a language continuum or theory. He states that children come to school with well-developed oral language, but no particular expertise in written language. When they learn literacy skills, they do not "learn their language". Rather, they learn to process and produce the written representation of their existing language. Conventional school writing limits the range of opportunities to practice all of the language functions necessary for getting things done in the real world (Griffin & Humphrey, 1979). For example, descriptive writing encourages a writer to describe but not to complain or request information. Shuy's study attempts to show how the development of oral language ability is not paralleled in the teaching of written language.

He suggests dialogue journals as a way to fill the hole in the developmental sequence of learning how to write.

Bode (1989) sees dialogue journal writing as providing students and teachers with a tool for empowerment. The power of interactive writing is seen as important in the concept of empowering students and teachers. The subjects of her research were first grade and sixth grade students where either teacher or parents corresponded with students in a dialogue journal daily. The focus was placed on meaningful communication rather than direct literacy instruction. Bode found that the dialogue journals allowed for a realistic function of language. The most frequent functions of language were complaining and asking questions. In traditional classrooms, there is usually no opportunities for these functions. However, the dialogue journal allows for a greater use of power for the students. Children are liberated to learn about literacy in an integrative manner and teachers are empowered to meet the children at their own

developmental level. As a result, Bode feels that achievement is increased.

Bromley (1989) suggests a buddy journal as a way to make a real, natural and meaningful connection between reading and writing. The buddy journal, an outgrowth of the dialogue journal, is a diary between two students in which they write back and forth to converse in writing. It incorporates some of the same aspects of oral conversation in written form: a) purpose for communication, b) opportunity to compose a message in a journal or log manner and c) feedback. Buddy journals differ from dialogue journals because they are not private. They may be read by many different students. Bromley feels that buddy journals build on student's natural ability to converse orally with each other.

Bromley, Winters, and Schlimmer (1994) did further research on the buddy journal in a project called "Book Buddies". This project linked graduate students with public school at-risk third graders that resulted in improved student attitude towards literacy. This collaborative

project benefited the school children by giving them interactive time with adults who had expertise in teaching and also benefited the graduate students with hands-on teaching-learning experiences with real students for the course work. The method used was dialogue journal writing and webbing folktales. Webbing helps children organize and integrate important information as they reconstruct elements of stories (Davis & McPherson, 1989). It is also a flexible tool for encouraging divergent thinking and simulating discussion (Alvermann, 1991).

Atwell (1987) suggests dialogue journals as a way of reflecting on reading, and teacher-learner correspondence as a way of extending and enriching reflection through collaboration. She feels that students' written responses to books would go deeper than their talk; that writing would give them time to consider their thinking and that thoughts captured would spark new insights. Atwell also suggests that a written exchange between two readers, student and adult expert, would move readers even deeper into

written texts, with the give and take of the dialogue helping them to consider and develop their thoughts. Finally, she feels that this special context would provide a way for the teacher to be responsive to every reader as well as creating specific occasion for them to write and reflect.

Pittman (1994) feels that by using dialogue journal writing in elementary school, a world of communication can be opened between teachers and students, students and families and student self-discovery. In the safe confines of a journal, students can reveal their innermost thoughts. They can reveal events in their personal lives that they may not be able to verbalize. A teacher's non-verbal written reaction helps to keep journal writing a safe out-let. By commenting on the writing, feelings are validated and credence is given to the process. Over the course of the year, the journal responses can be used to informally evaluate growth in writing skills.

Research indicates a relationship between

dialogue journal writing and purposeful and personal communication that can enhance students' literacy learning. However, there is very little evidence to support that dialogue journal writing is more beneficial than personal journal writing in enhancing literacy skills.

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Appendices

APPENDIX B
RESULTS - NUMBER OF WORDS

Sample	Week #1	Week #4
1	251	114
2	94	102
3	155	176
4	248	142
5	142	205
6	261	229
7	242	285
8	174	161
9	259	305
10	280	213
11	283	208
12	164	163

1-6 Wrote with written dialogue from teacher.

7-12 Wrote without written dialogue from teacher.

APPENDIX ARESULTSWriting Skills - Errors

Sample	Word Usage		Capitalization		Punctuation	
	wk#1	wk#2	wk#1	wk#2	wk#1	wk#2
* 1	4	1	1	3	3	2
2	5	1	2	0	9	3
3	2	1	0	2	2	1
4	2	3	1	1	4	2
5	1	0	2	1	3	2
6	1	3	1	1	1	3
7	2	0	4	2	2	5
8	2	2	2	0	1	0
9	2	2	1	3	1	2
10	3	2	1	3	1	2
11	1	2	5	0	4	2
12	2	2	3	1	3	1

1-6 Wrote with written dialogue from teacher.

7-12 Wrote without written dialogue from teacher.