Dialogue Journals – General


Reading and writing have traditionally been taught consequentially because writing has been premised as an outgrowth of reading. However, reading and writing positively influence each other and should therefore be taught simultaneously. One way of doing this is to write dialogue journals. It is an activity that “emphasizes meaning while providing natural and functional experiences with both reading and writing”. Some guidelines for doing dialogue journals are suggested. The teacher needs to start small at first to get used to responding to students and for better time management. Later on, the entire class can be included. A bound notebook for each participating child will not be easily lost. Motivate the child by describing the activity as a form of letter writing and also give interesting topics if the children have difficulty writing their first entry. Set aside a specific time when the students or the teacher will write their journals and responses. The teacher should share, comment, ask questions, and encourage students to express themselves. Teachers do not correct the journals. They keep it as a private communication with the child.


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Dialogue journals can serve as a bridge to develop the essayist prose that students need to learn in school. Traditionally, the student learn to write essays by writing essays but such approach fails to capitalize on what the students already know about face to face communication that will help learners transition more successfully from oral to written communication. With the use of dialogue journals, the teacher can make use of the functional language that the children already have and bring them to a level where they can begin to write in essayist form. The case study of a reluctant student presented in the article is instructive of the development of written language through writing dialogue journals. The student was not doing well in school and is a reluctant writer. He however, progressed from one needing active assistance to one that can write his own narrative without much help. The teacher was able to make use his knowledge of oral communication and led him by what is termed as interactional scaffolding so that he would be able to write more or develop a topic and eventually write about interesting or new things to an audience that does not necessarily have a background understanding of it. The process is similar to oral language acquisition where “the learner moves from guided to independently generating communication” (p. 149).

The author wrote about her experience using dialogue journals with her students from Zulu, Africa. In spite of having completely different backgrounds, the students and teacher were able to talk to each other in the journals. The experience taught the teacher the difference between talking together and being together in talk. Talking together involved effort to understand and get into what the other is saying because the topic is not of mutual interest or there is no involvement of one’s person. Being together in talk involved the effortless and engaging discussion of shared interests or things that touch each other’s lives and so the writers are personally involved. Talking together is learning from and understanding of the other person and finding ways to sustain the interaction. Being together in talk goes beyond the process of building relationships. It results in being personally involved and not just fulfilling roles. It is the “genuine interest to know each other as human beings . . . the readiness to reveal one’s self, . . . the sensitivity to matters of interest or importance to the other person (p.141)”.


The author taught a class of eight grade students, 97% of whom do not read on their own. The students were also bored with their reading class and the author had a difficulty motivating them to learn to read. She decided to revise her strategy and adapted a whole language philosophy of teaching where the students participated in a natural and authentic reading and writing tasks that relate to their own specific realities. The author conducted reading workshops that consisted of a specific time where the students can read on their own, student selected reading materials that promote ownership of the reading and writing task and opportunities to respond to their reading through writing in dialogue journals. The opportunity to read and choose the materials they want, according to the author made a difference in the students’ ability to move from one type of literature to another and “develop a taste for mature literature (563)”. The development of the students’ responses over time through their dialogue journal became an important means by which the teacher was able to individualize instruction that matched each student’s needs and reading level. The journal was also important in evaluating and documenting student progress. As a result of this reading workshop, the students’ motivation to read increased at the same time enjoyed learning from reading and writing.


The use of dialogue journals with learners of English as a Second Language can be an important strategy in developing communicative competence in a second language
in a non-threatening way. Second language learners usually have other important concerns that may interfere with their learning. The dialogue journal enables the students to communicate with their teacher in writing about topics that are important to them. Students with little or no background in their native or second language can start out by drawing. This strategy is non-graded and provides a natural context for literacy development. Teachers benefit from the opportunity to get to know students better, manage individual learning abilities by responding to their needs individually and the conditions that provide meaningful contexts to the students.


The author used the Kohl Technique to facilitate the second language learning of his adult, Western European students. The Kohl Technique makes use of the personal letter to correspond to students. Similar to dialogue journals, the teacher does not check the letters but gathers personal information about the students, uses the information to inform instruction and eventually develops the students’ linguistic competence through modelling. Reflecting on the development of his students’ correspondences, Rinvolucri observed that the students modelled their writing on his language “enriching their own text (p.18)”. He also found himself understanding each individual students’ needs and capacities that tend to get lost in planning for group lesson. He corrected a lot of wrong impressions about individual students and provided for their specific needs. Overall, there was improvement in the depth and quality of instruction in this intensive two week advanced language course.


Language has been taken for granted as a foundation for educating children. Yet, language is part of everything we do and learn. Nevertheless, schools do not capitalize on how the student naturally acquire language. The influence of the reductionist point of view in linguistic research has much to do with schools’ preoccupation with form. Shuy argues that language is a constructivist activity rather than reductionist. Children learn in context and by actively constructing the world not by breaking elements apart like what schools do in reading and writing. Language is used to get things done. It is functional. It is used to request, clarify, complain, direct etc. It is self-generated and should be contextually relevant to the person generating it. Schools should therefore adapt a constructivist approach that promotes active, contextual and self-generated language education.


Shuy makes a case for students engaging in dialogues in the classroom. This oral communication activity, he believes has been replaced in the classroom by the mere question and answer format. Nevertheless such dialogic activity is at the heart of learning. Children develop understanding about the world primarily through dialogues.
with those around them. One way of bringing back dialogues in the classroom is through writing dialogue journals. This activity is quiet, can be done during down time and is dialogic. It is comparable to oral conversation. It is one way in which students can build on what they already know, informal, conversational talk through journal writing and proceed to what they still need to know, the formal essay writing that is required in school. Writing dialogue journals is an interactive approach to student-teacher communication. It promotes the use of the different functions of language and topics are generated by the students themselves, sometimes with assistance from the teacher. Shuy compared classroom talk and journal writing communication and found that test type questions that the teacher already know the answers to and directives dominated classroom talk. Journals, on the other hand, generated more request for new information and a variety of language functions especially higher order functions such as predicting, evaluating and complaining.


In order to engage students in literacy practices that involve both reading and writing, teachers should consider using dialogue journals. Dialogue journals are written conversations between the student and teacher that enable them to both genuinely communicate their ideas, feelings, and experiences in the classroom while at the same time provide meaningful reading and writing experience to the students. It can also serve as a bridge from the more interactive conversations in real life to the more formal essay and report writing tasks in the classroom. The benefits of using dialogue journal include opportunities to evaluate and think together, to engage in different kinds of writing in a meaningful and purposeful way, and to read personalized communication with topics that are self-generated. Benefits for the teacher include better management of and discipline in the classroom informed by personalized communication with students. It also helps the teacher better plan their daily lesson.


Dialogue journals release the power to respond meaningfully and personally to thoughts, feelings and concerns not only about the classroom experience but also the personal lives of the participating students and teacher. Responding in dialogue journal is an empowering experience for the teacher and students because they listen to each other’s mind and heart and respond accordingly. The kind of responding in dialogue journal is unlike the kind of response a student gives to a teacher in classroom discussion. It is a kind of response that is engaged - first, it listens to the other’s person or voice and then the person commits himself/herself to respond. More than being an interactive and functional means of communication between the teacher and the students, dialogue journals enable teachers and students to listen, think together, reflect and negotiate the
meaning of their mutual concerns, ideas and experiences. It also develops literacy in its functional and social context.


This book is the result of a one-year study analyzing 26 dialogue journals of a teacher, who originated the dialogue journal and her students. Through this analysis, the researchers establish and describe dialogue journal writing as a communicative event. The dialogue journals written by sixth graders to their teacher and vice-versa were analyzed in order to describe their characteristics and functional uses in the classroom, the contexts in which they are used and from the perspectives of both the teacher and the students. In this classroom, dialogue journals developed as an interactive tool of communication for both the teacher and students where their thoughts, feelings, problems, and other concerns can be heard. It was used by the teacher to establish rapport with the students and to develop in them a sense of understanding for themselves, for others in the classroom and for what is going on in the classroom and in their lives. In the process of communicating with the teacher, the students develop functional language competencies that provide a bridge for developing more formal types of discourses in the classroom such as essays and formal compositions. Among the functional language competencies that emerge are complaining, asking and responding to questions, and discussing problems. Topic building was also an important part of the journal discourse. The construction of knowledge and the learning that takes place show how dialogue journals can successfully mediate these processes in a natural and meaningful way. Lastly, four themes have been identified by as the identifying characteristics of dialogue journals (p.13): 1) the development of mutual understanding, 2) the value of functional contexts for writing, 3) the cognitive demands of the dialogue on the students’ thinking, and 4) the way dialogue journals function as personalized education for the students.