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Let's Chat: Using Dialogue Journals

We, the two authors of this article, have used dialogue journals for many years: Pearly with primary school students and George with secondary, tertiary, and adult students. Below, we share our ideas and those of others about this valuable learning tool. In the examples from our students' journals, names have been replaced with letters.

What Do We Mean By Dialogue Journals?

To us, dialogue journals are similar to the diaries and journals that people have been keeping for thousands of years. One of the most famous published diaries is *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank. In both diaries and dialogue journals people write about their feelings, experiences, ideas, and about what they have learned. The difference is that a diary is written to be read only by the writer, whereas a dialogue journal is for two-way communication between the writer and at least one, but hopefully more, readers who write their responses in the journal.

We have read books about the use of dialogue journals for the teaching of English as a first and second language in the U.S. in the 1970s and 80s, from primary 1 onwards to graduate school, and we have heard about teachers in China in the 1960s using them in Chinese language instruction. They are also used in content areas, such as science. Characteristics of our dialogue journals include:

1. A separate notebook is devoted solely to the dialogue journal. Writing is done on both sides of the page to save paper and money. (Another way, which is just becoming popular, is to do journals on computers via electronic mail or diskettes.)
2. Students write about many different topics, depending on the purpose for which the journals are being used, for example, course content, how the class is being taught, out-of-school events, classmates and other people and places at school, questions about the teacher or other people and things, and poems, jokes, riddles, etc. they want to share.
3. Writing is double-spaced or with big margins, providing readers with space to write feedback. Feedback can also be written at the end of an entry.
4. Dialogue journal entries are done regularly (more than once a week, if possible).
5. Teachers, classmates, family members, etc. write responses, in the dialogue journals for each entry. Students should know ahead of time who may be reading and responding to their journal.
6. The focus is on communication. Thus, there is no overt error correction. This is a very important point.

7. Standard prewriting activities can precede dialogue journal writing. These include whole class or small group discussions, relevant readings or videos, and experiences in class, such as writing about reactions to a lesson, or out of class, such as what a student's family did on the weekend.

8. Writing can be done in or out of class. When writing is done in class and peer feedback is part of the process, dialogue journals are normally stored in the classroom. This is done to avoid the problem of students forgetting to bring their journals.

What Are The Benefits?

1. Dialogue journals provide our students and us with a vehicle for real communication. As a result, we get to know each other better. This is one of the joys of doing dialogue journals and contrasts with the usual situation in which having 40 students per class means little chance for individual student-teacher communication. We further promote this relationship by keeping our own journals or doing occasional entries which are passed out to the entire class.

Here is an example of Pearly and one of her students developing a closer relationship via an ongoing chat in the student's dialogue journal. (Please note that errors in student writing have not been corrected.)

Student: By the way, would you like to know a secret? I have plenty of secrets but not everyone can hear them. It is that I have alot of teddy bears and soft toys. But they are all kept in a high box. I cannot reach it as I was too short. Can you share some secrets with me please?

Pearly: You are fortunate to have so many toys. This is my secret... I'm working on the special surprise I will be giving you and the class at the end of term.

Student: Thank you for telling me your secret and I had thank my parents for the soft-toy. As you know A and I are very best friends. Can I know your best friend please, if you don't mind.

Pearly: My best friend is a teacher. She is Yoke Lin. She is now in Australia.

2. Our students' fluency improves, as they can temporarily set aside concern over accuracy. We provide them many other opportunities to practise accuracy in other parts of our teaching. Also, sometimes journal entries are a starting point in the writing process for more finished pieces of writing.

3. We have ongoing communication with our students (as in the example above under point #1). With most student writing, once a writing assignment is handed in, the topic is dropped, never to be revisited, because, after all, the topic was only an excuse to practice accuracy. In contrast, as in any real communication, with dialogue journals the same topic can be discussed in several continuous entries.

4. Our students have a purpose and an audience for their writing. This puts greater cognitive and linguistic demands on them, because they have to consider how their writing matches their purposes and the needs and interests of their audience. Thus, their writing becomes clearer and more complete.
5. Our students receive regular and prompt feedback on their writing. Such individualized feedback spurs them to write more and to write better. Students often feel encouraged to write because they know this individual attention and response is being given to each of their journal entries.
6. Our students are writing at text level, not sentence level. This provides them opportunities to practise text cohesion devices, such as linking words and connections between paragraphs.
7. Our students become more autonomous because they have some choice about what they will write about.
8. We enjoy reading students' writing more and, thus, read it more eagerly. Each student's dialogue journal entry is different from their classmates', as opposed to the usual situation in which teachers have to read 40 compositions all written on the same topic and following the same model. Students seem to enjoy journals too, as evidenced by the fact that some of Pearly's students kept writing to her after they had gone on to the next grade.
9. Our students write regularly. We feel that dialogue journals are a written equivalent of extensive reading, sort of like USSW (Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Writing). Hopefully, by writing regularly our students will come to appreciate writing as a tool for thinking, because as they write, new ideas appear and old ideas are clarified.
10. Dialogue journals provide our students a non-threatening way to communicate. Journals are less public than speaking in front of the class, and students don't have to worry about grammar and spelling errors. As a result, shy students who we can seldom get to speak sometimes find journals a more comfortable means of communication and become quite "talkative".
11. Journals provide a chance for our students to voice individual concerns, problems, and questions. In response, we can individualize instruction and get ideas for lesson planning. Also, we have opportunities to give students one-to-one advice, which we might not want to do in front of the whole class, about such matters as their behaviour. Below is part of a chat Pearly had with a student who was trying to reduce the weight of her school bag.

Student: I keep having this strange feeling. Every day, when I am in the hall, I keep thinking that I forgot to do my homework or to bring a book.

Pearly: Before you get to school, give yourself ample time to check on your homework and books to bring. Try this out and tell me whether it works.

Student: I am still trying to reduce the weight of my bag. Though I managed to reduce a lot of the weight, it is still quite heavy and I am not sure if I can reduce it anymore.

Pearly: Great! You tried! Let's work together on it, shall we?

Student: My bag is getting lighter every day. My father is very proud of me too. Now, my bag is as light as my sister's. I can even run with it.

Pearly: Well done! However, never try to run with a load on your back. It is not wise to do so. Do you agree?

12. Feedback encourages our students to think more deeply. This feedback can take the form of questions or statements. For example, when a student had written on the issue of corruption, George asked, "If one of your colleagues took a bribe, would you report them to the police"?

13. Our students can use the dialogue journals to provide us with feedback on our teaching. In this way, students may come to feel they have more power to shape their own learning. For example, many years ago some of George's students told him they felt the group activities they were doing were not successful because of lack of willingness to share and due to disputes between group members. In response to this feedback, George took steps to structure group activities to promote cooperation and to help students learn how to work together.

14. Last, but definitely not least, we become closer to our students. Through the dialogue journals, we learn about each other and begin to see each other as fellow humans, not just as students and teachers. This broader perspective can lead to a friendly classroom atmosphere and more productive instruction.

How Do We Give Feedback?

In our classes, readers give feedback on dialogue journals in many different ways. Again, this feedback concentrates on the ideas in the writing, not on the grammar and mechanics of the writing. Feedback can be inserted in the entry, in the margins in the space left between the double-spaced lines, or at the end of the entry. Ways of giving feedback include:

1. Questions that:

a. seek additional information, e.g., "How did you do that?"

b. ask for clarification, e.g., "I don't understand. Would you please clarify?"

2. Drawings, e.g., Happy Face.

3. Symbols, e.g., !! or ?.

4. Telling of our experiences - a student talked about what she is reading; we talk about what we are reading.
5. Advice.
 - a. Solicited
 - b. Unsolicited.
6. Requests that the writer share all or part of what was written with the rest of the class.
7. Short phrases, e.g., "Great minds think alike!" when we agree with an idea a student has expressed.
8. Exclamations, e.g., "Wow!", "Fantastic!"
9. Opinions, e.g., "That was very kind of you". These will mostly be praise and agreement, but disagreement can also be used.
10. Addressing of the writer by name with a short note at end of entry and signing it with the reader's name as in a regular letter.
11. Circling or bracketing parts of an entry to make it clear what part of the entry is being referred to.
12. Feedback on form - only if specifically requested, only on a small portion of the entry, and only in addition to, not in place of, feedback on content. Ways to do this include:
 - a. Focus on grammar or vocabulary errors that cause confusion or lack of understanding. In this way, we are just like real readers struggling to understand meaning, and form is only a vehicle for communicating meaning.

For instance, when a student wrote, "For distance, Singapore is very clean", George circled "For distance" and wrote "I don't understand" next to it.
 - b. Writers highlight one section or sentence where they would like feedback, instead of requesting feedback on the whole entry.
 - c. Have a "grammatical p.s.", e.g., "By the way, the usual way to say _____ is."

- d. Preteach structures that might come up in a particular entry, especially where everyone is writing on the same general topic.
- e. At another time, focus on errors that have occurred frequently in entries.
- f. Use the correct form in our content-based feedback. For instance, one of George's students wrote, "Do you know how do the businessmen think? They think every thing is " money ". Because they think money is their " God " money can make they are happy. That's why anything they do, they do for their big profit." Two of the errors here were (1) the use of "businessmen" which, contrary to the emerging international standard, ignores the fact that women can and are involved in business and (2) the spacing before and after quotation marks. George put the correct forms in his reply and asked a question to continue the chat: "What can we do to control businesspeople who think everything is "money"? How can we stop them from ruining society?"

13. Inserting a sheet of paper or a post-it note with feedback. This leaves the entry unspoiled. Writing feedback in pencil is also useful in this regard.

14. Asking for future news, e.g., updates "Please let me know how X (which was described in the entry) turns out."

15. By developing a system of abbreviations, we reduce the time spent writing the feedback without reducing the amount of feedback given. Examples of abbreviations are "Ss" for students.

How Do We Find Time To Read and Respond?

Without doubt, our number one problem with using dialogue journals is finding the time to read and respond to them. For instance, when George taught secondary school in Honolulu, he had five classes, which meant more than 150 students. Each class wrote journal entries more than once a week. Solutions include:

1. Sometimes, classmates or even students from other classes respond to each other.
2. Family members respond. In too many families, parents go to work before their children awaken in the morning, and in the evening children go to sleep before their parents come home from work. Journals can help to maintain family ties in these difficult circumstances. As pointed out by Miss Maureen Khoo of NTU/NIE, responses can be in languages other than English. Further, if a family member does not write, their responses could be oral. Some of the parents of Pearly's students found the journals so worthwhile that they are starting family dialogue journals, either in English or Chinese.
3. As the ideas in the above section on feedback show, responses do not have to be long. One good question or comment can be sufficient.

4. In our own experience and that of other teachers who enjoy using dialogue journals, the delight of real communication with our students - one of our big motivations to become teachers in the first place - makes up for the time spent writing reading and giving feedback on the journals.

5. If we have more than one class, we might do dialogue journals with only some of our classes. Or, we can rotate, taking in journals from different classes at different times of the month or year.

Conclusion

Many teachers in Singapore have been using dialogue journals with their students. We hope that after reading this article others will give journals a try. In particular, we would like to stress the importance of the dialogue journals' focus on ideas. While perhaps, in some cases, a limited focus on form is okay, there is a great danger that the well-worn tendency to treat writing as mere grammar and spelling practice will rear its ugly head.

Instead, why not let dialogue journals be a safe haven where students enjoy a respite from their battle against the sabre-toothed, multi-headed monster of grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Whilst within this safe haven, students can enjoy reading and writing language as part of authentic communication. In the process, they build their language proficiency and emerge strengthened for their future battles with the monster. We teachers too get a respite from concerns with correctness and have the chance to enjoy the pleasures of a friendly chat.

Related readings

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