Moving Beyond Journaling to Dialogues in Writing

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Introduction

A paradigm shift is occurring in the attitudes of researchers and educators regarding the role of writing instruction and practice in American schools. A traditional approach to the teaching of writing through a skills-based, sequence process with knowledge dispensed by a teacher often produces a resistance to writing. Students often tell teachers "I hate writing!" In response to negative feelings held by students, researchers were spurred to action to identify effective methods for teaching writing. Graves (1981) called for students' active participation in meaning-making writing opportunities. He argued that in order for writing instruction to be effective, students' voices needed to be heard, validated, and respected. He proposed that the strategy of allowing children to write and find their voice would reap better writers. Additionally, the *writing to learn* philosophy came to the forefront as researchers uncovered the connection between activating schemas and communicating. Stimulating schema enhanced students' writing (Graves, 1981). As learners write from experiences they have had, they acquire the confidence and skills needed to become proficient in sharing their messages. They begin to see themselves as writers.

Educators turned to various approaches for providing authentic practice to keep up with the trend of integrating writing in performance-based assessments. Teachers who offer opportunities for varied writing practice and context place an emphasis on children negotiating their messages through writing. Many classrooms began using the writing process, which has been shown to be highly effective (Atwell, 1987).

The last two decades have produced theoretical-based methodology models emphasizing student-centered and learner-controlled writing experiences. During the 1990s, writing evolved into a function of learning. As more was learned about the writing process, it became evident that writing led to clarifying thinking and served as a forum for revealing students' thought processes and reasoning (Gordon & MacInnis, 1993).

However, not all types of writing fit neatly into the writing process. One way of ensuring children's messages are heard and seen is through the use of dialogue journals (Peyton & Seyoum, 1988; Peyton & Staton, 1993; Staton, 1988; Staton & Peyton, 1986). Such exchange of information between writers in a dialogue fashion supports Vygotsky's social development theory that defines the power of the connection of thought and social interaction, supporting the view that social interaction promotes deeper understanding (Garmon, 2001; Gallimore & Tharp, 1990; Gavelek, 1986; Vygotsky, 1987). An essential question that emerges when thinking about implementing dialogue journal writing in the elementary classroom is: do dialogue journals help students become better at writing and who see themselves as writers?

Benefits of Dialogue Journals

Dialogue journals invite students to regularly communicate their thinking and reflections with others through self-generated topics (Staton, 1988; Peyton, 1997). Teachers and students participate in private written conversations by sharing feelings, understandings, experiences, collaborations, and other interdisciplinary activities. This sharing process often results in robust problem-solving and shared understandings. In the early 80s, dialogue journaling came to the attention of "educators at a time when the broader ideas of international participation in learning and the power of natural conversational discourse were becoming wide spread" (Staton & Payton, 1986, p. 3). Drawing on the work of Vygotsky, educators began to realize the importance of conversation in deepening understanding. It became understood that by articulating one's thoughts, learners are led to a deeper understanding of the topic. In dialogue journals, learners participate in two-way writing events. This reciprocal discourse denotes a back-and-forth conversation in which both participants share insights and reflect on the ideas exposed. In this correspondence, readers become writers and writers become readers. Dialogue journals promote meaningful on-going conversations in a social setting while giving valuable practice in writing skills. The back and forth nature of dialogue journals also develops the writers' appreciation for the mechanism needed to clearly convey a message.

Most research in the area of dialogue journals has been between students and teachers in higher education (Peyton 1997; Staton, 1988; Werderich, 2006), but little research has been conducted regarding the use of dialogue journals in elementary schools. Students enter into a non-threatening, non-graded communication with the teacher in a dialogue situation. Students control the amount of writing and the content of the conversation; the teacher responds by *writing back* to the student in the same informal conversational manner. The turn-taking written discourse continues as students and teachers navigate shared meaning. Teachers are given insights into where the students are in terms of their writing abilities and an appreciation of what they are thinking. Writing becomes an informal and personal growth opportunity for the students and teachers. Learners increasingly realize that writing is purposeful. Motivation to write is increased as they become keenly aware of their audience and more confident in their personal connections. Along the way, students also hone their own writing craft as they purposefully monitor their spelling, grammar, and punctuation so their message is clearly read. Writers become writing mentors for students as they model writing conversations through the written conversations. Additionally, the premise that the more students write the better writers they become has been consistently supported (Routman, 2012).

Some of the other rewards identified in using dialogue journals with students include: exchanging ideas, clarifying meanings, valuing another person's point of view, responding to questions or comments, and developing social interaction skills. Anderson et al. (2011, p. 270) acknowledged the importance of "forming positive student-teacher relationship" especially in middle school when social disengagement becomes popular. The researchers studied dialog journaling as a potential buffer to withdrawing from interactions in the classroom and school. Bromley, Winters, and Schlimmer (1994) used dialogue journals to expand university students "experience the interactive nature of reading and writing and the critical role of audience as they worked directly with children" (p. 393).

Roadblocks to Dialogue Journal Writing

Dialogue journals have not always been met with success. Frequently, teachers who employ the model indicate the journals fail to provide an explicit and direct approach to improving writing skills. For some students, reading and mimicking the writing from their partner provides strong literacy models they can naturally assimilate. However, for other students more explicit practice and instruction is needed. If teachers follow the non-graded, non-edited format in their written conversations with students, some learners may repeatedly practice inappropriate conventions. Trying to find the right blend of supporting students' ownership of their writing, building their confidence in sharing a written message, and promoting excellence in writing is a fine line for some teachers. Additionally, dialogue journaling emphasizes more informal and conversational writing rather that explicit writing genres.

Time is another critical issue to be discussed in addressing dialogue journal writing in the classroom. Two important concerns emerge from this issue. First, does the time spent dialogue journal writing net stronger outcomes than time spent in other forms of writing? Some research studies suggest students indicate they benefit more from dialogue journal with two-way conversations over reflective journals where limited feedback is given (Roe & Stallman, 1994). However, these studies were aimed more at comprehension of particular content. Second, is the recognition that the time teachers need to invest in dialogue journaling is tremendous. Time restraints on classroom teachers continue to be a major hurdle for consistent use of the model. "While students enjoy teachers' written responses to their journal entries and the responses provide reading-writing models, this practice is very time consuming for the teacher" (Routman, 1991, p. 231).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine if there was a significant difference in the quantity and content of written responses in fourth grade students' journals for students who had routinely dialogued with their teacher and those who had routinely dialogued with a peer.

Researchers and educators have witnessed the success of dialogue journals involving teachers and learners. Swift (1993) found "writing in dialogue journals, students became more self-assured about their ability to write" (p. 367). Peer-to-peer interaction has also been found to be an important facet of classroom instruction. According to Vacca and Vacca (1993), students need opportunities to confer with their peers. Further, Atwell (1987) reported writers (students) need responses from various audiences including their peers. Consequently, if dialogue journals were used for "teacher-learner correspondence as a way of extending and enriching reflection through collaboration" (Atwell, 1987, p. 165), then it is important to question whether similar collaborations would occur between student and peer communications. By investigating the difference between teacher-learner and learner-learner communication in dialogue journals, this study intended to offer significant data to aid teachers in determining the intrinsic value of student-to-student dialogue journals.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The questions that guided the study included:

1. Would there be a difference in what students talked about when writing to a peer vs. when writing to a teacher?

2. What topics did students talk about in dialogue journaling?

3. Did their writing increase when given the opportunity to write to their peers or a teacher?

The hypotheses that were used to guide the study for statistical analysis were:

1. There will be no significant difference in the content of written responses for students who routine wrote to a teacher in a dialogue journal vs. those who routinely wrote to a peer.

2. There will be no significant difference in the amount of written responses for students who routine wrote to a teacher in a dialogue journal vs. those who routinely wrote to a peer.

Participants and Data Collection

Participants for the study included 52 fourth graders who were enrolled in two intact fourth grade classrooms in a rural Midwestern school in the United States. Twenty-six boys and 26 girls with varying writing abilities (all identified at least at a second grade level) comprised the sample. The area was predominantly agriculture based with middle to lower income families and less than 5 percent identified as culturally diverse. Both classes were evenly split according to students' abilities and gender. The two teachers involved in the study taught communication arts (reading, writing, grammar, spelling and vocabulary) to their homeroom classes but departmentalized content area instruction by exchanging classes for math, social studies, and science. The two classrooms were similarly arranged, used the same schedules, followed the same curricula, planned as a team, and used the identical discipline procedures/model.

A quasi-experimental research design was used in which the quantity and content of written response was compared for the group of students participating in student-teacher dialogue journals (*n*=26) and the group of students participating in student-student dialogue journals (*n*=26). The control class was considered the class dialoguing with the teacher. The experimental class was deemed the class writing back and forth with a peer. Peers were matched prior to the beginning of the study period by the teachers. The pairings were specific to gender (boy-boy or girl-girl) and ability (high with average and average with low). This decision was made because in this fourth grade, students had already become conscious of gender difference and often became embarrassed around the opposite sex. Similarly, we wanted students to feel safe and confident in their writing skills but also have appropriate models. So, carefully pairing abilities was important. The pairings, either with the teacher or a peer, remained intact throughout the four week study.

The study began with an introductory lesson on journal writing. The students in both classes were introduced to dialogue writing though a whole class mini-lesson. The teachers began by engaging several students, one at a time, in a *conversation* concerning a different topic. By building background, the teachers were connecting students' understanding of the nature of dialogue. The student identified turn-taking, talking about a topic, no criticism or grading, and respect for each other as major components of the conversation. Next, the teacher modeled a written conversation (dialogue) between the two of them teacher and teacher on two different overheads. They modeled think-alouds as they took turns reading and responding to the others'

comments for three turns each. As a summary activity, the classes developed a Venn diagram comparing and contrasting the written to oral dialogues. After questions were answered, the students were introduced how they would be using this in the next four weeks.

Students were given bound composition books and engaged in twice-weekly dialogue journal writing. The first entry was evaluated for quantity and content focus. This entry served as a covariate (baseline) for the study. Students wrote in their dialogue journals on Thursday for 20 minutes and at the same time each Tuesday and Thursday thereafter. The study began the week immediately following the baseline entry. Teachers collected student journals following each journaling period to secure equal writing time. In the control group, the teacher responded, in each student's composition book and returned it at the beginning of the subsequent writing time. Students in the experimental group were given their peer's or teacher's entry. Then they were given 20 minutes to respond again or initiate new topics. On Tuesday and Thursday for four weeks, the students read and responded to either the teacher or a peer. Each writing contained feedback from previously asked questions and often led to new questions/comments posed by the writer.

At the end of the four-week time period, the journals were collected and assessed for the quantity and content focus of each written response. Quantity was determined to be number of complete thoughts rather than the number of complete sentences. At times, punctuation was overlooked by the students in their writing and because mechanics were not being evaluating, and it was asserted that counting the complete thoughts was a more accurate representation rather than *sentences*. For example, one student wrote: *I like to eat hotdogs and last night we went to the high school football game and I got a C on the math test yesterday.* This was scored as three complete thoughts although handled in one sentence with no punctuation. Because the same scoring protocol was used, it is asserted that the intended thoughts were counted accurately. Content was coded and frequencies were tailed to determine the dialogue focus. For example, comments about home or family were given a nominal indicator of 1, statements made about what happened in our classroom were coded with a 2, thoughts about homework assignments were coded with a 3, etc. In the example above, *eating hotdogs* was given a 1 code and getting a *C* was a 3.

Results

Data obtained on the quantity of complete thoughts were analyzed using an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) to determine if the two groups' scores were significantly different. The covariance variable was the independent writing sample or journal entry for each student completed at the beginning of the study. A .05 level of significance was used to accept or reject the hypothesis. The ANCOVA used in comparing the quantity of written responses revealed a probability of 0.03. The null hypothesis stating there was no significant difference in the quantity of written response in the two groups was rejected.

Data obtained on the content focus were analyzed using the Chi-Squared Test of Independence to determine if the two groups' scores were significantly difference. A .05 level of significance was used to accept or reject the hypothesis. Table 1 shows the mean averages for each week for each group.

Table 1
Means for the Quantity of Written Response

Group	Adjusted Means
Student-Student (covariate)	(6.24)
Week 1	9.70
Week 2	14.18
Week 3	14.50
Week 4	14.38
Student-Teacher (covariate)	(6.66)
Week 1	8.02
Week 2	10.99
Week 3	9.57
Week 4	9.34

As indicated in Table 1, all of the students gained in the quantity of written response from the initial journal entry. It is interesting to note the jump in writing from the first week to the second week. Students reported they "got it" during the second week of the dialogue writing process and were more at ease about writing. This was reflected in the increased writing. It is also important to note that the quantity of writing within the student-student pairs increased again in Week 3. The slight drop in Week 4 for both groups may have been due to a shortened writing period on a Tuesday due to statewide standardized testing. As expected, the entry following the testing period included comments about the tests from all of the students. Additionally, it should be pointed out that the student-teacher pairings progressively decreased after Week 2.

The content focus for the responses ranged from home, school, classrooms, bus rides, friends, teachers, tests, homework, to hot lunch, punishments, fashion, sports, and tattling. Table 2 shows the frequencies for home-related and classroom-related discussions by week. These were the two most common areas discussed and important to report here.

Table 2
Frequency of the Content Focus in the Weekly Dialogue Journals

Group	Home-related	Classroom-related
Student-Teacher		
Week 1	18	11
Week 2	15	14
Week 3	21	8
Week 4	12	17
Total	66	50

Student-Student		
Week 1	14	15
Week 2	19	10
Week 3	16	13
Week 4	11	18
Total	60	56

As shown in Table 2, the overall frequency counts were quite similar for these two areas. These two were selected because they were the strongest topics that were consistently written about and were representative of the split for all of the identified areas. After completing the study, students indicated that they felt as comfortable talking to a teacher as they were with a peer about most things. However, Table 2 shows a slight indication that talking to the teacher about school issues happened more often than in the student-student writing. It is also interesting that although the students wrote more quantity in the student-teacher pairings, the same content was discussed in both groups. In the examples above, both groups commented 116 times about home or classroom related issues during the four week study period. The Chi-Squared Test of Independence yielded a probability of 0.7884. The null hypothesis stating there was no significant difference in the content focus of written response in the two groups was accepted.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicated that student-student dialogue journaling may have merit as a vital part of the regular elementary classroom writing program. With no significant difference found in the content, data revealed that these fourth graders discussed various topics and issues with their peers as frequently and openly as they did with their teachers. Initially it was suspected that certain topics would be discussed only with the teachers or peers, respectively, but this was not found to be the case. The students felt equally respected and supported in both pairings. This would support Atwell's (1987) ideas that the writer's need for response can come from a variety of sources. It is equally important to make a positive connection to the findings of the study conducted by Staton (1988) in the nature of dialogue journal writing. The student entries reflected personal opinions, positive and negative feelings, comments about all aspects of their lives, and concerns of current issues at home and school.

An aspect that was found particularly interesting was the quantity of written responses over the course of the study period. As previously stated, students felt more comfortable in writing and the process by the end of Week 2. The trend for the student-student writing was increasing throughout the study, while the trend for the student-teacher began decreasing. This may be attributed to an inflated quantity of written responses in the early stages of the study by the control group writing to the teacher. Calkins (1994) posited that students are used to writing only on demand and to perceived expectations of the teacher. Some of the students in the control group remarked after the study that they thought they had to write *a lot* to the teacher. When they figured out the teacher was not going to *correct* the writing or ask for more, they began to level out in their writing. However, the students in the experimental group freely wanted to write more. At the end of the study, the student-student pairs wanted to continue the writing project. Students in the control group (teacher-teacher) writing wanted to try writing to their peers.

Implications for Teachers

The first findings of this study would suggest teachers and students could benefit from implementing a student-student dialogue journal program in their classes. This would address the concerns raised by Routman (1991) regarding teacher time constraints, yet allow for more student control in writing. If student-student journal writing continued to increase in quantity as indicated in this pilot study, the possibility exists that the quantity would equal and may surpass writings with the teacher.

Students enjoyed the interactions in the dialogue format. As discussed, students in the experimental group wanted to continue the program – a pleasant surprise to the teachers. Also, the students in the student-teacher pairing requested they have a turn at dialoguing with peers. Teachers know the benefits of writing to pen pals or doing letter writing projects, and dialoguing journals net these same results and more. Dialogue journals can easily be included in the classroom routine and response is immediate. Students are easily and readily engaging in writing. Students are in control of the topics, the amount of writing, the tone of the conversation, and the shared understandings. They have an interested audience, receive feedback, build relationships, and explore ideas.

A question that became increasingly intriguing during data analysis was "how was the quality of writing impacted through this project?" Although the study was not designed to explicitly look at this area, in a post hoc analysis of the writings it was discovered the quality of writing generally improved. Students' writing mechanics improved as well as the content clarity and penmanship as evidenced by the comments students made in the margins of the journals. Notes were found that give the partners suggestions like "write better" or "sp" (for spelling). When asked about this, students said at first they had trouble reading some of the responses. When this occurred, they wrote back in the next journal that they could not read something or did not understand. The responding partner often corrected spelling or wording, modeling the correct change. This resulted in students striving to make their messages clear and valuing the use of Standard English.

Few studies since the 1980s and 1990s have dealt with writing in dialogue fashion, and yet the call for more and more writing continues. Teachers need research-based studies to offer alternatives to them in selecting and using different approaches to skill development. Additionally, Peyton (1997) suggests the English language learners (ELLs), with language and cultural barriers may benefit greatly from dialogue journals. Imagine the impact if those written conversations were with peers. Further study is warranted in the area of dialogue journaling, but this pilot study may entice educators to look at dialogue journal writing from a different perspective. Providing background experiences in dialogue journaling, setting *rules* or agreed upon *boundaries* for writing and content, and structuring time for written conversations are critical for the success of this type of project. Teachers and students can benefit from increased positive experiences in journal writing for an audience.

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