

READY, WILLING, AND ABLE: Boys & Writing



Action Research Report 2010

INTERNATIONAL BOYS' SCHOOLS COALITION

VOLUME I



office@theibsc.org • www.theibsc.org

© 2010 by the International Boys' Schools Coalition. All rights reserved.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
DI LAYCOCK BARKER COLLEGE, HORNSBY, AUSTRALIA	
MARGOT LONG ST. JOHNS COLLEGE, JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA	
Collaborative Creative Writing with High School Boys.....	3
JUDE ARBUTHNOT WESTLAKE BOYS' HIGH SCHOOL, AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND	
To What Extent Does the Journey Experience Influence Boys' Attitudes To, and Experiences Of, Writing?.....	19
KEAN BROOM ST ALBAN'S COLLEGE, PRETORIA, SOUTH AFRICA	
Writing Conferencing and Mentoring: Using Senior Writing Advisors to Foster Confidence in Writing by Freshmen Boys.....	27
BECKY BROWN CHESTNUT HILL ACADEMY, PHILADELPHIA, USA	
Visual Image Writing Prompts.....	43
GENE BRUNER ST. CHRISTOPHER'S SCHOOL, RICHMOND, USA	
Less is More? A Study of the Impact of Selective Correction on Writing by ESL Boys	53
ALVIN CHOW ST PAUL'S COLLEGE, HONG KONG, CHINA	
The Use of Visual Stimuli Helps Boys to Become Prolific, Powerful and Confident Writers.....	63
SHERIDAN COVERDALE BRIGHTON GRAMMAR SCHOOL, MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA	
Journaling Boys.....	87
SHERRY CREASMAN PRESBYTERIAN DAY SCHOOL, MEMPHIS, USA	
Make My Day ... Read What I've Written!	95
SIMON CURTIS THE RIDGE SCHOOL, JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA	

Table of Contents *continued*

Teaching Beyond the Classroom:
The Use of Class Websites in the Writing Process.....105
PAUL EMANT ST JOHN’S COLLEGE, JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA

Discussion Boards and Boys’ Writing121
TRACY A. EWING THE PHELPS SCHOOL, MALVERN, USA

Using Boy-Built Grading Rubrics.....131
BETSY KELLY ST. ALBANS SCHOOL, WASHINGTON, DC, USA

Introduction

DI LAYCOCK BARKER COLLEGE, HORNSBY, AUSTRALIA

MARGOT LONG ST. JOHNS COLLEGE, JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA

The International Boys' Schools Coalition commenced its Action Research Programme for member schools in 2005. Each year since, educators from around the world have applied to be part of this programme, wherein a common research topic is investigated in members' respective schools.

Working from within the supportive environment of the programme's online learning community, researchers identify and ask questions about an area of their practice, find out what's known about it, modify or design a strategy to enhance that practice, determine how to measure its impact, and assess how well it has worked, and with what results. It is research on the front-line of teaching boys, and action that contributes to ongoing improvement in practice.

The success of its action research programme is striking vindication of the international dimension of the IBSC, and eloquent proof that boys' educators from around the globe can collaborate and learn from one another – enriching both their professional lives and the quality of education for their students. Moreover, the findings of the projects in this publication demonstrate that boys' schools are sites of excellence in learning and teaching; places where teachers continually reflect on and improve their practice.

Members of the fifth cycle of the IBSC's action research programme addressed the question: *How can we help boys become prolific, powerful and confident writers?* A team of 22 teachers, the biggest team to date, from countries including Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Canada, South Africa, the UK and the US worked on a variety of exciting projects, the findings of which are presented here. These findings were presented at the annual IBSC Conference in Philadelphia and published on the IBSC website. The 2009–2010 team was also privileged to be able to share and discuss their projects in Philadelphia at a pre-conference Masterclass presented by Professor Thomas Newkirk, a prominent commentator and researcher in the area of boys' literacy.

The topic of boys' writing was considered worthy of investigation in light of studies that indicate many boys are often not writing with confidence, nor writing prolifically, and that they do not particularly enjoy the process. The research also indicates that many factors have contributed to this situation: the so-called "feminisation" of writing, the over-emphasis on writing for assessment and achievement rather than for a meaningful audience, limited choice of topics and structure, and so on.

A number of clear themes became evident as the team pursued their research projects. The first theme focused on the ways in which Web 2.0 applications such as wikis, discussion boards and blogs can change the way boys feel about writing tasks, and encourage them to become more powerful, prolific and confident writers.

A second theme of the projects highlighted the importance of audience and feedback for boy writers. Teachers explored a variety of ways to provide an authentic audience and worthwhile feedback to encourage their boys to write. One of these projects evaluated the effect of using anonymity in writing, while another used a process of selective correction to encourage second language writers of English.

The third theme in the projects relates to the use of a variety of prompts and stimuli to encourage boys to write, whilst the final area of focus examined the value of collaborative projects in engaging boys in the writing process.

It is hoped that the work of the researchers involved in this action research project will resonate with readers. The reports bring practitioners' intuitive and unarticulated craft knowledge to the surface and acknowledge what teachers do in the "messes" of our complex classroom environments (Newkirk, 2009, p. 28). These reports celebrate the nature of teaching as "particularized, situated, child-specific, class-specific, day-specific [and] school specific" (Newkirk, p. 29), and in doing so, have the potential to empower us to uncover new meaning in our practice, and motivate us to share, challenge and change such practice for the betterment of the boys in our schools.

References

Newkirk, T. (2009). *Holding on to good ideas in a time of bad ones: Six literacy principles worth fighting for*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Collaborative Creative Writing with High School Boys

JUDE ARBUTHNOT WESTLAKE BOYS' HIGH SCHOOL, AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND

Abstract

For six weeks at the beginning of the school year in 2010, thirty Form Five (14–16 years old) students from Westlake Boys' High School in Auckland, New Zealand participated in a creative writing project. The aim was to research whether collaborative writing with a peer made the boys more powerful, prolific and confident writers. The students were required to complete three writing tasks; the first independently, the second collaboratively, and the final piece independently for their IGCSE (International General Certificate of Secondary Education) English Language coursework. Both qualitative data, in the form of survey and interviews, and quantitative data, in the form of a rubric of judgement criteria, were applied to the written work to compare the boys' writing before and after working collaboratively in class. Results from the quantitative data indicated that the action did increase the volume of writing, the power and effect of the writing, and the confidence of the boys. The qualitative data generally supported these findings, but also highlighted a negative change in some individual boys' attitudes to writing and the action itself.

Introduction

In the world we live in, collaboration is evident everywhere we look. In schools, although collaboration clearly takes place in the classroom, we formally assess students individually. An investigation as to whether a more structured approach to collaboration in the classroom would improve boys' writing, and whether the collaborative writing experience would have a positive impact on their individual writing, is relevant and pertinent in today's educational climate.

Boys, particularly of lower ability, do not always have the confidence to play around and experiment with their writing. There can be an aversion to "making mistakes" or "being messy", and as a result they may write very little. The aim of this action research is to determine whether writing with a partner will increase confidence and encourage the necessary playing with words and sentences that is needed to improve boys' writing.

When prompted, boys can often articulate what they are thinking verbally. These prompts often come from the teacher. A more student-focused approach in the classroom may encourage prompts from the students. To investigate whether there is a strong link between discussion of ideas and the consequent development, there is hope that this action will encourage the boys to

become more articulate in their writing. This is especially the case when there is a marked difference between oral and written communication; boys are able to often explain verbally but cannot communicate this in their writing.

This action of collaborative writing is designed to enhance the *social nature* of learning. Boys can learn from one another and they enjoy working together. It may seem clichéd, but students tend to do better when they are enjoying what they are doing. Indeed, there is a considerable amount of research to link engagement with achievement. There is evidence to suggest the power of collaborative reading groups to improve their reading confidence and ability (Klingner & Vaughan, 1998); it is possible therefore that a collaborative approach to writing may have similar results.

Key themes in literature around this topic are the participants' attitudes, preferences, perceptions and beliefs about writing. Research has found that negative attitudes to writing tended to be attributed to "lack of interest or perceived value, and not to a lack of self confidence" (Hensen, 2001, p. 12). It is for this reason that writing should have a clear context, a specific audience and purpose. Boys respond more effectively to tasks when they can see the reason, and therefore the value, in them.

In the adult world, we work collaboratively and it is a realistic proposition that students should learn how to do this. Allowing and encouraging students to work together in a safe, structured environment may also benefit them as lifelong learners, as well as in the short term as writers. It has been shown that "there is a significant link between pupils' attitudes to writing and their competence in writing" in younger students (O'Brien & Neal, 2007, p. 4) and that these attitudes are positively affected by creating a collaborative atmosphere in the classroom and encouraging students to work together.

As the literature also suggests, however, there are possible problems that may occur if we approach collaboration purely as a teaching strategy. Teachers can get overly caught up in the practical application of collaboration (Reither & Vipond, 1989). It takes careful planning to establish effective collaborative tasks and there are several different strands to working collaboratively in the classroom that include co-authoring, peer-editing and knowledge-making. In order for these strands to work together trust needs to be established between the participants and the teacher. In a classroom context students and teachers learn, teach and support one another.

Much of the research on collaborative writing is concerned with primary school students and college (university) students. Further, most of the literature reviewed deals with both genders. This research therefore fills a gap in the research by focussing on boys aged fourteen to sixteen in a high school context. It aims to build on existing research by looking specifically at the following research question:

To what extent does collaborative creative writing with their peers help boys to become powerful, confident, prolific writers?

For the purpose of this research it was necessary to define the criteria. "Powerful" is judged to address how the boys crafted their language choices for effect and meaning. This took into consideration their range of appropriate vocabulary and sentence structures, and their ability to fulfil the requirements of the tasks. Understanding of audience and purpose by the students was very important. Tasks needed to have a clear context.

“Confident” was judged based on the boys’ confidence and ability to play with language and to make and correct errors. The originality and creativity of their ideas within the parameters of the tasks they were given was also considered. This was a very important part of the collaboration process as the boys discussed, edited and corrected their writing with a partner.

Finally, “prolific” was initially one of the easiest terms to define as it was possible to look at how much the boys wrote. How the boys dealt with word limits was assessed, but there was the need to add more to this criterion and to look at how much care they took in their writing. Quality and quantity were important, not one or the other.

Two more categories were added to underpin these three original judgement criteria: accuracy and collaboration. While accuracy was implicit within the existing criteria, it needed to be explicit as it was important in the context of this specific classroom where students are working towards IGCSE Language coursework. A collaboration criterion was added to help judge how well students worked together in these tasks.

The Research Context

The research took place at Westlake Boys’ High School which is situated on the North Shore of Auckland in New Zealand. It is traditional and progressive in its outlook and has earned a proud record for academic, sporting and cultural achievement.

Westlake is a state funded school of 2200 students with a dual pathway that offers the New Zealand NCEA qualifications and the Cambridge International Examinations. The school is very proud of its academic streaming and approximately the top 30% of students follow the Cambridge programme.

The Research Sample

The research sample comprised a class of twenty-nine boys (between fourteen and sixteen years-old) in Form Five preparing for IGCSEs in English Language and Literature in November, 2010. This specific class was the sixth stream out of fifteen classes in English. The majority of the class were strong in more practical and mathematical subjects and struggled with English. Of a class of twenty-nine, fifteen had English as a second language. The research was led by me, as the teacher in charge of Cambridge English and second in charge of the English Faculty.

Methodology

An action research approach was taken as this encourages self-reflection on a teacher’s practice in the classroom. The model is appropriate and relevant as it allows a practitioner to question behaviour through process and understanding. The action research approach is open-ended in the sense that a teacher reflects on process, understanding and outcomes, and then reacts and changes practice appropriately and continually. The method allows the research to have a clear localised context, therefore allowing the teacher to discover relevant information for their classroom and their school (Whitehead, 1998). Kemmis’ Action Research Model (1985) which follows the steps of plan, act, observe and reflect, was used in planning and carrying out this research into boys’ writing.

The Action

The action of collaborative writing allowed the class and the teacher to work towards a real assessment that will contribute to their IGCSE result at the beginning of the school year, in the hope that it would encourage more positive attitudes towards writing, increased confidence, a powerful use of language and higher attainment levels.

My understanding of action research determines that a teacher should reflect on her own practice and behaviour in the classroom in a realistic and relevant context. The group of participants chosen, typically, have writing as an area of weakness. The context of the action was a portfolio of three 500–800 word pieces of writing that is required for the IGCSE English Language course. The action of collaborative writing focused on these writing pieces (see Appendix A for all writing tasks).

The first writing task was a descriptive piece in which boys create a sense of “being there”. This was a written task that has been used at this level for the past three years. The boys completed this task independently after pre-teaching activities were carried out in the classroom.

The second writing task was carried out with a writing partner. The writing partners were chosen at random. Students were given photographs of characters and asked to develop a detailed background for the character. They were then paired with another student who had a different photograph. The writing pairs were asked to develop a narrative in which the two characters’ paths cross. This short story task was the main collaborative writing task.

To allow a comparison to be made between the first independent task, “Being There”, and the final task, the third writing task was carried out individually. The task was very similar to the second task in that students were given images of characters, and then asked to develop a narrative which included both characters.

Research Methods

Qualitative and quantitative data were collected from students in the form of pre-action and post-action surveys, interviews, examples of written work and video recording of students discussing their collaborative tasks.

Prior to the writing tasks a survey was completed using an online survey tool, Survey Monkey, to elicit students’ attitudes, preferences, perceptions and beliefs towards writing. After the action was completed a post-action survey was also completed by all participants (see Appendix B).

In order to gain a more detailed insight into the students’ responses to the action, two smaller focus groups of four students were selected to discuss the boys’ writing and their responses to the action.

To assess the students’ writing before, during and after the collaborative writing action, an assessment rubric (Appendix C) was developed which allowed the work to be judged on a scale of one to five on the following judgement criteria: prolific, powerful, confident, accurate, collaborative. The final criterion, collaborative, is only relevant to the second task.

Discussion of Results

In my discussion of results, students are referred to by initial where necessary.

To judge the power of the writing, judgement criteria from the rubric were applied to the participants' written work before and after the collaborative writing. It was possible to see a positive change in the power of their writing. The general trend was that the boys did become more aware of the effect their language can have on a reader, and began to craft their writing more effectively. Most students moved up one or two bands within the criteria as they began to consider their language choices with more care. One student whose writing did not become more powerful was already one of the more capable writers in the class prior to the action. He began the year with high levels of attainment in creative writing in Form Four.

The language choices in general showed developing vocabularies, and an increased awareness of the effect different sentence structures can have on the meaning of a text.

The pre-action and post-action surveys were particularly important in assessing the participants' confidence. What was most striking was that prior to the writing tasks only three boys indicated that they felt confident about writing. After the action had been completed this increased to nine boys. The boys felt more confident and this was supported, to some extent, in the analysis of their written work.

In comparison to the "powerful" criteria, 22 boys moved up the "confidence" scale by one or two points. Following the collaborative writing project there was evidence of more originality in the writing, and less reliance on cliché. Boys appeared to play more with their language and to take risks. It was evident in the classroom that they had more confidence to ask their peers about their ideas and writing, and the teacher was no longer the main focus for feedback. In the initial survey teachers were considered the main person the participants felt comfortable sharing their work with, and the person they would prefer to offer feedback. An element of trust has been established within the classroom between peers to enable the shift to occur. It is only fair to say however, that some participants still find it difficult to share their work with others, including teachers.

The area where most change was evident was in the participants' ability to become more prolific. Every boy wrote more and met the word limit demands of the task after the collaborative action. Some students moved three points up the scale when their individual work prior to and after the action was compared.

The criterion for "prolific" did not merely address the amount the participants write; it also looked at their ability to be clear and concise, and the amount of care taken in the tasks. There was a distinction here to be made between students writing more and those students who wrote more of a higher quality when it came to language choices and effect. Only 6 of the students scored 5 on the prolific criteria on the rubric, suggesting that some difficulty still remained in writing of good quality for a sustained length; quality and quantity are what every English teacher would like to see.

In using the rubric to assess their written work, it was apparent that after the action the majority of boys did become more powerful, confident and prolific. Their attitudes however show a slightly different picture.

The surveys were important in judging changes in the boys' attitudes. The survey was initially designed to assess the boys' attitudes with regards to confidence, but also provided some insight to the general attitudes towards writing and the collaborative action. These results, although not specifically linked to the action, provide some interesting findings for further consideration and a possible future round of action research.

Worryingly, after the collaborative action 6 boys indicated that they either 'strongly disagreed' or 'disagreed' that writing was important. At the other end of the scale there was a much smaller change from 23 to 21 boys indicating that they agreed that writing was important. There had been a great deal of focus on creative writing in the classroom over the six week period, and this may have had a detrimental effect on their attitudes. From the survey it is evident that the majority of boys felt the classroom was the place for writing, and at present, other than homework tasks, writing does not take place at home for fun or enjoyment. Although this result about a negative attitude to writing is not directly related to my action, it is a finding that interests me.

There are some interesting comments about writing on the initial surveys. R. says, *"Whenever I am feeling sad, angry about things, I write. It makes me feel better when I let my feelings out onto paper. A relieving feeling."* L. realises that *"writing is important. It's something you have to do, so you might as well enjoy it."*

On the other hand B. believes that *"writing is not important. You don't necessarily have to be smart to write a story. You just have an imagination."* This is a view echoed in other student discussions witnessed in the classroom. Some students clearly felt that imagination and creativity were an obstacle in this particular writing task. Because the collaborative pairs were decided randomly, there were three groups where this was a particular issue. These boys are also quiet and reserved, sometimes to the point of being secretive, and this affected their ability to discuss and share ideas.

Although changes in attitudes to writing were evident, the most interesting responses came to the action itself. After the collaboration more students preferred working alone than with others (a change from 13 to 22 boys). Students reported the difficulty in coming to a consensus of opinion and the amount of time that was required to work together. Some participants also commented on the domination of one partner over the other in the task.

Responses were not all negative, however. Other participants reported that it helped when someone read what they had written, and that they enjoyed being able to discuss ideas to develop them more fully. Comments in this vein supported the points made in the introduction of this report with regards to the social nature of learning, and the importance of verbal communication in supporting writing. Participants who enjoyed the discussion and sharing aspects of the action also reported a change in confidence. R. said *"It gave me great confidence towards writing"*, while J. reported that the collaboration allowed him *"to see some ideas from a more unusual perspective."*

Many of the participants would have preferred to choose who they worked with. This may help to develop the element of trust that is required in collaboration to enable it to work effectively. That said, the qualitative data of the surveys did not entirely match the quantitative data gleaned from the writing by applying the rubric. Both sets of data were useful in determining the success of the action.

Conclusion

The individual writing tasks completed after the collaborative action demonstrated, in the most part, more powerful, prolific and confident writing. Participants wrote more, and showed improvements in the structure and cohesion of their work. Tasks were completed with language choices being made judiciously for effect, and there was an increase in the range of vocabulary and sentence structures. The writing was more original and less clichéd; more risks were taken by the participants and there was more willingness to play around with language and to make changes if necessary.

In the classroom, a positive working atmosphere was evident. Participants were supportive and were learning from one another. It was evident in their discussions that there was an element of evaluation and justification of language choices. In the two discussions recorded there was evidence of peer-editing and correction. The participants discussed the technicalities of language, such as tenses and paragraphs, while building on narrative ideas for their work. Throughout these non-confrontational discussions the participants used tentative and inclusive language such as *“shall we move this”*, *“maybe this isn’t relevant”* and *“do we really need to use that sentence”*.

The participants’ maturity in approach is worth mentioning. There were no issues where students refused to work together, and although they may not have “liked” who they worked with, each collaborative pair produced a piece of creative writing that fulfilled the IGCSE English Language coursework assessment criteria. In each lesson, students worked together to make changes to improve and develop their work. Participants were aware that the project’s aim was to improve on their own individual writing, and to achieve marks that will affect their IGCSE English Language coursework mark. This perhaps was a big enough motivation for the students to get as much out of the process as possible.

Students no longer look to the teacher for immediate feedback, and instead feel more comfortable and confident in approaching a peer. This has not replaced teacher feedback, but instead provides other opportunities for students. Trust was an essential part to this action. The action was carried out at the beginning of the school year and has established a sense of responsibility and collaboration which has continued in the past few months. Many of the criticisms from the students arose from not being able to choose a friend to work with. Perhaps if the collaborative action had taken place later in the year, there would have been a greater level of trust between participants, and therefore more enjoyment and thus, more change.

Ironically, despite the shift in attitudes towards writing, and the very clear negative attitudes of some towards the action itself, the boys’ writing has improved. They may not have *liked* the action, but it does appear to have improved their writing.

One consideration to make was the genre of the writing task: creative writing was used as part of this action as it was relevant and specific to the context of this particular classroom and school. It would be interesting to see if the results differed with another genre. One of the students commented that *“I am against collaborative writing, [it] might be a little more useful when studying poetry though.”* A large proportion of the Form Five English course at Westlake concerns itself with Literature and the writing of essays. This student may be right and this has implications for a further cycle of action research.

In terms of implications for future practice, collaborative writing is a strategy which has shown to have positive results in the classroom. It cannot be used as a one-off teaching strategy as its success has its roots in the good habits and trust established between students and teacher. It needs a positive working environment, and in turn helps to develop a working environment where students look to one another for advice and support. It can help students to develop ideas — ideas that are not simply limited to creative writing. Collaborative writing in the form used in this action research project does have its limitations and the participants pointed these out in their feedback: “*It is difficult to work outside the classroom on our work*”, and “*Sometimes homework tasks can set us back as we have different ideas.*” One possible solution to this is the use of online technology which would enable students to communicate with each other outside of the classroom.

To conclude, collaborative writing with a peer has to some extent enabled the students of Westlake to become more powerful, prolific and confident writers. It cannot be said whether it was solely responsible for the changes evident in the data as the nature of teaching is that students are influenced by many different factors, but the data would suggest that it has had some positive effect on the writing of boys and their attitudes.

References

- Carr, W. and Kemmis, S. (1986). *Becoming Critical: Education, Knowledge and Action Research*. Lewis: Falmer.
- Daly, C. (2002). *Literature search on improving boys' writing*. UK: Ofsted publication, pages 14–20.
- Daiute, C. and Dalton, B. (1993). Collaboration between Children Learning to Write: Can Novices Be Masters? *Cognition and Instruction*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (1993), pp. 281–333.
- Davenport, M. and Julie Eckberg, J. (2001). ‘Put an Idea Together’: Collaboration and Composition in Third Grade Writing Workshop. *The Reading Teacher*, Vol.54, No. 6, *Putting Books in Children's Hands Teacher Research and Inquiry Reading Literacy Education* (March 2001), pp 562–566.
- Florito, S. and Clark, C. (1982) The Functions of Writing in an Elementary Classroom. *Research in the Teaching of English*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (May 1982), pp 115–130.
- Hensen, S. (2001). *Boys and Writing: Reluctance? Reticence? Or Rebellion?* New Zealand: Massey University College of Education.
- Leahy, R. (2002). Conducting Writing Assignments. *College Teaching*, Vol. 50, No.2 (Spring 2002), pp. 50–54.
- Kemmis, S. (1993) Action Research and Social Movement. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 1.
- Kinsier, K. (1990). Structured Peer Collaboration. *Cognition and Instruction*, Vol. 7, No.4 (1990), pp 303–321.
- Klingner, J. and Vaughan, S (1998). Using Collaborative Strategic Reading. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, July/August (1998), pp 32–37.
- McNiff, J. (2002). *Action research for professional development: Concise advice for new action researchers*. Third edition.
- O'Brien, A. & Neal, I. (2007). Boys' writing: a hot topic... but what are the strategies? *Education Today*. March, 2007.
- Reither, J. and Vipond, D. (1989). Writing as Collaboration. *College English*. Vol. 51, No 8 (Dec 1989), pp 855–867, National Council of Teachers of English.

Appendix A

TASK 1: BEING THERE

You will complete this writing task by yourself. This will give me an idea about how you write by yourself. The instructions are very thorough. Go through each step carefully. We will use this descriptive piece of writing as a benchmark to see how you improve throughout the year.

Student Instructions Sheet

You will write a description about a place. Use Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* as a starting point, you will then choose your own scene and develop a description which evokes a sense of being there, of the place, its people, its sights and sounds. Your writing will be rich in imagery combining elements of both poetry and prose. Your writing in this particular style will be between 300 and 400 words long.

I will be looking at:

- how well you express and develop your ideas
- your ability to use an appropriate writing style
- how well you organise your writing
- your accuracy in spelling, punctuation and paragraphing.

Extract from *Under Milk Wood* by Dylan Thomas
(The prologue to *'Play for Voices'*)

To begin at the beginning:

It is spring, moonless night in the small town, starless and bible-black, the cobblestreets silent and the hunched, courtiers'-and-rabbits' wood limping invisible down to the sloeblack, slow, black, crowblack, fishingboat-bobbing sea.

The houses are blind as moles (thought moles see fine tonight in the snouting velvet dingles) or blind as Captain Cat there in the muffled middle by the pump and the town clock, the shops in mourning, the Welfare Hall in widows' weeds. And all the people of the lulled and dumbfound town are sleeping now.

Hush, the babies are sleeping, the farmers, the fishers, the tradesmen and pensioners, cobbler, schoolteacher, postman and publican, the undertaker and the fancy woman, drunkard, dressmaker, preacher, policeman, the webfoot cocklewomen and the tidy wives. Young girls lie bedded soft or glide in their dreams, with rings and trousseaux, bridesmaided by glow-worms down the aisles of the organplaying wood. The boys are dreaming wicked or of the bucking ranches of the night and the jollyrodgered sea. And the anthracite statues of the horses sleep in the fields, and the cows in the byres, and the dogs in the wetnosed yards; and the cats nap in the slant corners or lope sly, streaking and needling, on the one cloud of the roofs.

You can hear the dew falling, and the hushed town breathing. Only your eyes are unclosed to see the black and folded town fast, and slow, asleep. And you alone can hear the invisible starfall, the darkest-before-dawn minutely dewgrazed stir of the black, dab-filled sea where

the *Arethusa*, the *Curlew* and the *Skylark*, *Zanzibar*, *Rhiannon*, the *Rover*, the *Cormorant*, and the *Star of Wales* tilt and ride.

Listen. It is night moving in the streets, the processional salt slow musical wind in Coronation Street and Cockle Row, it is the grass growing on Llaregyb Hill, dewfall, starfall, the sleep of birds in Milk Wood.

Listen. It is night in the chill, squat chapel, hymning in bonnet and brooch and bombazine black, butterfly choker and bootlace bow, coughing like nannygoats, sucking mintoes, fortywinking hallelujah; night in the four-ale, quiet as a domino; in Ocky Milkman's lofts like a mouse with gloves; in Dai Bread's bakery flying like black flour. It is to-night in Donkey Street, trotting silent, with seaweed on its hooves, along the cockled cobbles, past curtained fernpot, text and trinket, harmonium, holy dresser, watercolours done by hand, china dog and rosy tin teacaddy. It is night neddyding among the snuggeries of babies.

Look. It is night, dumbly, royally winding through the Coronation cherry trees; going through the graveyard of Bethesda with winds gloved and folded, and dew doffed; tumbling by the Sailors Arms.

Time passes. Listen. Time passes. Come closer now.

Only you can hear the houses sleeping in the streets in the slow deep salt and silent black, bandaged night. Only you can see, in the blinded bedrooms, the combs and petticoats over the chairs, the jugs and basins, the glasses of teeth, Thou Shalt Not on the wall, and the yellowing dickybird-watching pictures of the dead. Only you can hear and see, behind the eyes of the sleepers, the movements and countries and mazes and colours and dismays and rainbows and tunes and wishes and flight and fall and despairs and big seas of their dreams.

From where you are, you can hear their dreams.

Instructions:

TASK 1: PLANNING

- a) Choose a scene you know well. It might be the farm, the township or suburb where you live, or the local shopping mall or park.
- b) Develop an outline for your description. You could choose use or adapt these ideas or develop your own:
 - Choose a time of year:
 - *e.g.: winter*
 - Establish a place and time of day:
 - *morning in the township*
 - Populate your scene:
 - *children and family waking up getting ready for church*
 - *Joe working in the garage*
 - Move to a new time of day in the same scene:
 - *later in the morning*

TASK 2: EXPERIMENTING WITH SYNTAX

- a) Draft your own opening where you set the scene and establish the atmosphere. Incorporate the details you planned for your opening in task 1 experimenting with sentence patterns. You should avoid every sentence being structured in the same way. Write in the present tense to create a sense of being there.

TASK 3: EXPLORING PERSONIFICATION

- a) Read these examples. The words which are central to the personification are in bold.
*Chilly sunrise **creeps up** over the farm. There an old farm house **lounges lazily**, well-warmed and well lived in.*
*The delicate breeze **breathes** — **gentle and curious** — over the mountaintop. It **swoops down**, in and out and around the branches of the tall pine trees before **slithering off**, then high, high back up into the clear morning sky it goes*
*The sun **stands sternly**, **supervising** all from the centre of the sky*
- b) Draft one or more sentences which personify a part of nature (like the wind, the mist or the morning) which you could incorporate into your own description.

TASK 4: WRITING THE FINAL PIECE:

- a) Write in the second person. Use direct address to give a sense that you are inviting the reader to share your impressions of a place you know well.
- b) Read your draft aloud to a partner or the class to highlight how you have used language.

TASK 5: CHECK YOUR WORK

- a) Your writing should be crafted to **create effects** through its use of
 - imagery and other language devices such as alliteration
 - rhythm
 - present tense and direct address
- b) Your writing should be **effectively structured** with
 - an opening which sets the time and place
 - the introduction of characters into the scene
 - a moving on in time
- c) You should use appropriate **writing conventions** accurately, including some complex sentence patterns.

An Example of Task 2/3

Using the photographs below, develop a background for two of the characters. You must then construct a narrative in which these two characters meet. Look at the photographs for clues as to how their paths may cross.



IGCSE CREATIVE WRITING TASK

You must use the skills you have learnt over the last two weeks to produce a piece of creative writing by yourself.

You must use the images as a starting point. You have a choice of ONE of the following:

- A complete short story
- The opening chapter of a novel (your main focus should be on increasing tension)
- A day in the life of ONE of the characters

You need to follow these guidelines:

- 500–800 words
- No more than ten lines of dialogue/speech - you don't need to have any if you don't want to
- Show a clear sense of audience and purpose
- A variety of language structures, techniques and vocabulary for effect
- At the top of your work state the task, target audience and give your writing a title
- Accurate spelling, grammar and punctuation
- Content and language should be appropriate – remember a CIE examiner is going to mark/look at this

You will have today's lesson to plan. The rest of your work will be completed AT HOME.

Important dates:

DRAFT due on Wednesday 24th February

I will annotate your drafts and return before Monday 1st March

FINAL COPY due (with draft attached) on Thursday 4th March

This will go towards your IGCSE Language coursework mark and your internal mid-year mark.

Use the IGCSE mark scheme to ensure you do everything that is required of you.

Appendix B

SURVEY QUESTIONS

Pre-Action:

1. As a writer I am: Confident, Sophisticated, Just 'okay', Hesitant, Awkward, Clear, Disorganised, Logical, Fluent, Coherent, Other
2. Writing is important: Strongly disagree, Disagree, No opinion, Agree, Strongly agree
3. I am a good speller: Yes, No
4. When I write I wish I could...
5. I like to write outside of school: Yes, No
6. I like to share my writing with: Parents, Teachers, Friends, Classmates, Other
7. It helps me when I get feedback from: Parents, Teachers, Friends, Classmates, Other
8. I prefer writing: In a group, Alone, Not at all

Post Action

1. What did you most enjoy about writing with a partner?
2. What did you least enjoy about writing with a partner?
3. Do you think the collaborative writing has improved your own independent writing?
4. Think about your own writing. How have the following improved since the collaborative writing: Spelling, structure, grammar, ideas, punctuation, expression/phrasing, fluency, confidence, how much you can write.
5. You were not able to choose who you worked with. Was this a good idea?
6. As a writer I am: Confident, Sophisticated, Just 'okay', Hesitant, Awkward, Clear, Disorganised, Logical, Fluent, Coherent, Other
7. Writing is important: Strongly disagree, Disagree, No opinion, Agree, Strongly agree
8. I prefer writing: In a group, Alone, Not at all
9. How has collaborative writing helped you?
10. How else could collaborative writing be used in school?

Appendix C : Rubric

Collaborative Creative Writing: JUDGEMENT CRITERIA	1	2	3	4	5
PROLIFIC: How much did they write? Did the meet/exceed word limit demands? How much care did they take in their writing?	A few sentences Unstructured Task not taken seriously	Written work has some cohesive structure though not always successful Some care has been taken	Written work has clear structure Evidence of cohesion and development Word limit considered	Written work has very clear structure and ideas are developed Word limit is met Care has been taken to complete task	Meets all demands of task Shows ability to be clear and concise Judicial choices of language
POWERFUL: Did they fulfil the task? Did they use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for effect? Did their writing have meaning? Did they craft their language for effect?	Writing is off task Language is limited Vocabulary is limited Sentence structure has no variation	Writing is on task Tendency to use cliché Relies on basic language features Sentence structure has little variation	Fulfils task Some variation of language use to achieve effect Developing vocabulary Attempts to use variety of sentence structure with some success	Task is completed with skill Language is used to create effect which has meaning in context of the writing Variety of language features, vocabulary and sentence structures	Fulfils all areas of task with flair Language is crafted carefully to achieve effect with the reader in mind Wide variety of language features, vocabulary and sentence structures with appropriate effect
CONFIDENT: Were the ideas original? Did they play with language? Were they able to correct errors and learn from them?	Lack of originality Limited Errors left unchanged	Some originality Some cliché Some errors changed – spelling, punctuation	Original Some inventiveness with language – not always successful Major errors changed – single words	Very original Attempts to play with language with some success Errors changed – single words, restructuring of sentences	Very original and engaging Manipulates and crafts language for effect All errors changed – often beyond the point of just changing one word or two
ACCURACY: Was their writing accurate in terms of spelling, grammar, punctuation and structure?	Lots of inaccuracies that affect meaning	Some inaccuracies – meaning clear	Occasional inaccuracies – common errors	Few inaccuracies – meaning not in doubt	No inaccuracies
COLLABORATION: Is their evidence they worked together? Did one partner take the lead? Did they discuss their work? Were changes made?	No collaboration Basic discussion	One partner did most of the work Discussion is limited	Working together to make changes Some discussion which does not always lead to effective change	Working together to make effective changes to improve and develop the work Some effective discussion	True collaboration; shared responsibility; effective discussion which leads to change

To What Extent Does the Journey Experience Influence Boys' Attitudes To, and Experiences Of, Writing?

KEAN BROOM ST ALBAN'S COLLEGE, PRETORIA, SOUTH AFRICA



Abstract

Boys in Grade 10 at St Alban's College in Pretoria, South Africa, participated in an action research project to observe the impact that a 23-day adventurous journey (The Journey) had on their general attitude towards writing and their motivation to write. The research question was: "*To what extent does The Journey Experience influence boys' attitudes to, and experiences of, writing?*"

This research was undertaken to establish whether the unpressured time, the powerful experiences, and the separation from other means of communication during such a Journey would influence boys' attitudes towards writing in a positive way. The project was based on a continuous 23-day adventurous Journey of 450 kilometres, during which time their communication with the outside world was limited to letter-writing only. I found that boys' motivation to write and their general attitude towards writing as a means of communication increased tremendously. This is significant as it strongly suggests that boys can be motivated to write through positive and meaningful writing

experiences and conditions which allow them to use their writing talents in an unpressured and real way.

Introduction

The research question that guided my action was: *To what extent does The Journey Experience influence boys' attitudes to, and experiences of, writing?*

My research aim was to observe the effects that The Journey had on the attitudes of 110 boys towards their writing. Essentially, it was about identifying circumstances in which boys experienced writing in a positive way – such that it motivated them to write and improved their general attitude towards writing.

Many teachers I have talked to feel that boys, on the whole, do not seem particularly motivated to write and that, when asked, they will tell you that they are neutral or negative towards writing rather than positive. During my literature review it became evident to me that, generally, boys all over the world tend to see writing as a 'bind' or something to be endured. It is therefore important to find ways to motivate boys to write and to improve their attitude toward writing so that they find writing a positive experience. The assumption here is that a positively motivated writer is more likely to become a better writer. If you experience writing in a positive way, you are more likely to write more often, to be more motivated to write, and to feel more confident about the writing you produce.

In terms of writing, there is research to suggest that, amongst other things, boys are motivated by physical activity and real experiences, a real purpose to write, and a real audience. An event at our school called 'The Journey' offers Form 3 boys a 23-day experience which meets all these criteria. Boys are physically active each day and have to write letters to family and friends to keep in touch with them during the 23 days. I felt, therefore, that this would be an ideal scenario to use by which to investigate the effects of physical activity, real audience and real purpose on boys' motivation to write.

Definition of Terms

The Journey: 'The Journey' is a continuous 23-day, adventurous journey undertaken by the grade 10 boys of St Alban's College. The entire route of 450 kilometres is covered on foot, by bicycle, and by canoe, through remote areas. The boys are completely self-reliant during the entire Journey and have no contact with the outside world (parents, friends, etc.) except through letters that they may send and receive.

Powerful: 'Powerful', in the context of this project, implies writing which successfully conveys its meaning and achieves the purpose for which it was intended.

Confident: For the purposes of this project, a 'confident' writer will be defined as a writer who feels that through practice and writing regularly, he can write with assurance and certainty and without hesitation.

Prolific: For the purposes of this project, a 'prolific' writer is defined as a writer who writes frequently due to a passion for writing.

Literature Review

Grubb (2001) suggested that physical activity increases boys' motivation. This supported my feeling that an extended period of outdoor adventure may positively influence the boys' motivation to write. I expected their levels of motivation to be higher, and that when they got opportunities to write they would be more positive about it than when they were 'forced' to do writing under pressure situations in the classroom. Fletcher (2006) felt that boys need motivation for writing that is 'authentic, active, imaginative, results-based, and fun'. I believe that The Journey provided this type of motivation.

Away from the normal business of everyday life at school, the boys were able to collect their thoughts and compose their letters in a thoughtful and unhurried manner. Krashen (2001) suggested that periods of 'incubation' are important for writers, and that time away from the normal environment helps to foster creative thought. In the natural and largely unpressured environment of The Journey, I feel that the boys got this kind of opportunity.

Fischer (2002) found that boys respond best to short-term targets, purposeful tasks, and subject-matter relevant to their needs and interests with real purposes and outcomes. This is very much in line with the conditions that the boys experienced while writing on The Journey. The only way that the boys were able to communicate with the outside world for 23 days was by letter. This in itself meant that the boys had a very real purpose when writing – to maintain communication with friends and family. In addition, they wrote about subjects that were very relevant to their needs – their feelings (perhaps homesickness) and their physical needs (food, medication, books to read) – and with the very real purpose of eliciting the desired response from their parents (or friends). The outcomes of their writing were therefore also very real – eliciting, or not eliciting, the response for which they were hoping! When they failed to elicit the desired response initially, they were motivated to try a different tactic or adapt their writing in some way.

Research Context

St Alban's College is a private secondary school in Pretoria, South Africa, for boys from Grade 8 to Grade 12 (ages 13–18). The school is run under the auspices of the Anglican Church. The focus of the College is on offering an all-round education. The 23-day 'Form 3 Journey' is the focal point of a diverse, progressive program of outdoor and experiential education from grades 8 to 12. Along with other outdoor interventions, these experiences contribute significantly to the overall education that a boy receives at St Alban's College. Before this piece of research was undertaken, The Journey had been lauded as a very successful rite of passage and as an instrument by which to stimulate personal growth and improved emotional intelligence in boys. This piece of research is the first attempt at looking at the possible 'academic' spin-offs that can result from The Journey Experience.

Research Methodology

Action research is concerned with understanding human behaviour through our observations of the research environment. A better understanding of the situations that we deal with in daily practice helps us to bring about changes that can positively influence our future actions. This study has allowed me to view The Journey in a rather different light than I have before, and, apart from the insights gained through the current study, it has opened up a number of avenues that I would like to research in future.

The qualitative side of action research allows us to gain a holistic picture of the way in which participants experience a particular environment or set of circumstances through reflection and through their own voices. Through this research project I have come to understand more fully how The Journey influences the lives of boys in areas that I may have overlooked had I not engaged with them at various levels through the questionnaires, letters and focus group interviews.

The improvement of practice is probably the most important outcome of action research. Through investigation and interpretation, it offers one a vehicle to understand one's own practice better, and therefore the opportunity to improve that practice. In my case, the action research process has allowed me to investigate ways of motivating boys to write by integrating the academic and outdoor aspects of our curriculum. Through the boys' responses I have also been able to discover ways in which The Journey can be improved and adapted to further meet boys' needs and stimulate even greater levels of personal growth and self-discovery.

Research Methods

DESCRIPTION OF 'ACTION' TAKEN

The whole of our Grade 10 class (110 boys) was taken out of the normal school environment for a period of 23 days. In smaller groups of 18 boys and two staff members, they travelled to consecutive remote destinations in the African bush, where they camped each evening. There was no planned academic component to the experience. Each day consisted of the process of navigating to the next destination and dealing with whatever circumstances occurred on route. This may have included such things as crossing rivers, abseiling down cliffs, resolving conflict within the group, cooking meals, etc. While 'journeying' the boys were allowed to communicate with the outside world (parents, friends, etc.) only via handwritten letters. This effectively made the written word the only form of external communication available to the boys. The period of 23 days was long enough for even the most hardy or self-sufficient participant to feel the need to write.

DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPANTS

The participants in the research process were 110 Grade 10 boys from St Alban's College, aged 15 to 16. The Journey is an annual event in our calendar, and the Grade 10 boys all consented to be part of the action research process.

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected before and after The Journey in the following ways:

1. Questionnaires were given to the boys to gauge their general attitude towards writing before and after The Journey. The general thrust of the questions was aimed at gauging whether a participant generally viewed writing in a positive, negative, or neutral light. Boys were also asked to choose descriptors which they felt best portrayed the way they felt when faced with a writing task.
2. Each boy wrote two sample letters to their parents on the same topic. One letter was written before The Journey, and one was written on the last day of The Journey before they departed for home. In the letters the boys were required to express their appreciation for what their parents do for them. My intention was to have actual pieces of writing that I could use to see

whether any change in the boys' writing had occurred during The Journey. I reasoned that if there was an improvement in their motivation and general attitude towards writing, it might translate into actual changes in their writing. The sample letters, I felt, could help me to determine whether this was the case or not.

3. A focus group of 10 boys was selected to discuss their attitudes to writing before and after The Journey. I made notes of things that were said at these interviews and tried to get a feel for the general message or 'holistic picture' that the boys were giving me.

Data Analysis

With regard to the questionnaires, I tabulated the responses of the participants to the direct questions such as 'Is your attitude to writing positive, negative, or neutral?' From this I was able to make a direct comparison between the number of boys that felt, positive, negative, or neutral about writing, before and after The Journey. This gave me an indication as to whether the general response of the group had been positive or negative.

Secondly, I compared the letters that the boys had written to their parents before The Journey to those they wrote on the last day of The Journey. Instead of looking at the letters expecting to see specific differences, I tried to look at them without any preconceived ideas in the hope of noticing a pattern of change if there was one. I hoped that I could use the letters to help verify the responses given in the questionnaires. The rationale behind this was that if a boy felt that there was a significant improvement in his motivation and general attitude towards writing, it might be evident in some way in his letters. More out of interest than anything else, I graded the pre- and post-Journey letters to see if there was a noticeable difference. I also gave the letters to a friend to grade to try and avoid any bias I may have had while marking.

Thirdly, I used my notes from the pre- and post-Journey focus group interviews to get a feeling for whether there had been a change in the general attitude of the boys towards writing, and whether or not they now felt more motivated to write.

Results

The majority of the boys responded very positively to their experience of writing during The Journey. In answer to the question: "Do you feel positive, negative, or neutral about writing?" nearly 50 percent of the boys stated that they were more positive about writing after The Journey. Of the 50 percent that felt more motivated, approximately half moved from negative to positive, while most of the others moved from neutral to positive. A few moved from the negative category into the neutral category. Of the roughly 50 percent of boys who did not indicate that their attitude towards writing had changed, most had started with an already positive attitude towards writing. (Unfortunately, my questionnaire did not make provision for boys to indicate whether they had moved from positive to more positive.)

Participants were also more motivated to write because they had no other means of communication with the outside world. Although this started off as an extrinsic motivational force for many, it soon became intrinsic as the responses received from friends and family to their writing motivated their further responses in turn.

Many of the responses in the questionnaires indicated that during The Journey the boys found writing about real issues and to a real audience for a prolonged period, extremely rewarding and motivating. There were many comments made about the enjoyment and reward of writing about real and current issues, and receiving real and relevant responses. Many boys pointed out that this was very different from the writing they had to do in class, which they felt was often 'pointless' and 'artificial'.

From my comparison of the letters written before and after The Journey, I noticed that many of the letters written at the end of The Journey were generally more emotive. In most cases this made the letter better as it captured the essence of what the writer was feeling more vividly. The tone of gratitude was also improved by the use of the more emotive adjectives. The general feeling I got was that the real experience that the boys had undergone had inspired them and helped them to write 'from the heart' better than they had done before.

Discussion

My research question guided me to look at attitudes about and experiences of writing. My findings indicate a significant increase in the number of boys who had a very positive experience of writing while on The Journey and that this caused their general attitude towards writing to become more positive. The following were the main reasons that the participants gave to explain their more positive attitude towards writing:

- Most of the boys alluded to the fact that they had experienced what they called 'meaningful' writing for the first time. I gathered from the focus group interviews that this meant that the letters they had been writing were for real communication and that they received real and meaningful responses. Related to this, most boys felt that the wealth and variety of experiences they had had on a daily basis made finding subject matter easy when writing letters home.
- Many boys made reference to the fact that the emotions they experienced during The Journey made writing easier and that they felt their writing 'flowed' rather than having to 'force' it out.
- A significant number of boys felt that the availability of unpressured time to write was a significant factor in making them more positive about the writing experience.
- A large majority of boys commented that after a day of physical activity, sitting and writing a letter home, or making an entry in their journal, was something they really looked forward to.

The Journey experience therefore created opportunities and circumstances in which boys experienced writing in a positive way. This has led to a more positive attitude toward writing among the boys in general.

Conclusion

Boys are more motivated to write when they have real issues to write about and a real audience to write to. Some of the responses to my questions in this regard were:

"I knew my letters were actually going to be read by someone."

"On Journey, I meant what I wrote. In class, I make up stuff..."

Boys' attitudes to writing change in a positive way if they are exposed to circumstances in which their writing offers them a genuine means of communication, and in which they have to use their writing to illicit the responses they desire. They also enjoy writing more when they have enough unpressured time in which to think and reflect. Answers like "*I had more time and less to do*" and "*I had time to think about stuff and I wasn't rushed*" were quite common in response to my questions in this regard.

Furthermore, it seems that when boys become emotionally involved in the writing process, their motivation to write and their general attitude towards writing becomes more positive. "*I wrote better because I had real emotions to write about...*" was a frequent response.

Finally, participation in physical activity can contribute significantly towards the motivation of boys in a given activity — in this case, writing.

Implications for Practice

For most of the boys there was a significantly positive improvement in their general attitude towards writing due to the positive experiences they had of writing while on The Journey. Therefore, some of the conditions present on The Journey illicit positive outcomes with regard to boys' attitudes to writing. The implication of this for future practice is that these conditions could, where possible, be incorporated into the writing environment at school. The conditions that I can identify positively are: writing for a real audience, writing about real events, having sufficient time to think and reflect, eliciting emotional responses (specifically in boys), and including physical activity to aid motivation and stimulate thought.

Implications for Future Research

An issue that came to mind while conducting this research was that The Journey experience as a whole might elicit the above-mentioned responses, but that isolating individual factors might seriously limit their impact. (The whole is greater than the sum of the parts.) I know from my own experience that using some of the strategies I have mentioned here, hasn't had the same result as on The Journey, where they were a part of a whole range of factors that acted simultaneously to make the writing experience more positive. This might be something I could look into in more detail in further research.

References

- Fischer, R. (2002). Boys into writing; raising boys' achievement in writing. In M. Williams, *Unlocking Writing*. Abingdon: David Fulton.
- Fletcher, R. (2006). *Boy Writers: Reclaiming Their Voices*. Portland: Stenhouse.
- Grubb, J. (2001). Research briefing on boys and underachievement from the TES. *National Literacy Trust* [online] www.literacytrust.org.uk/research/boyact.html
- Krashen, S. (2001). Incubation: A neglected aspect of the composing process? *ESL Journal*, 10–11.
- McNiff, J. (2002). *Action research for professional development: Concise advice for new action researchers*.
- Newkirk, T. (2002). *Misreading masculinity: Boys, literacy and popular culture*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Reflection

The process that has led to this final report has been an exciting, challenging and rewarding one for me. The kick start to the process was meeting the other action research participants in New Zealand and together thrashing out a platform from which to work. The networking with other participants and the sharing of ideas and experiences was an exciting and motivating experience in itself. The subsequent communication with the team via email and blogging was more difficult for me than I had imagined it would be – purely from a time perspective.

I have had to find time in an already busy schedule to read and explore the literature on my chosen topic, and I found that to be one of the highlights of the process. Not only has it broadened my understanding of boys and their writing, but it has given me many new ideas that I can implement in my teaching.

What stood out for me in particular was the realisation that, as teachers, we are virtually always busy with action research of some kind as we try out new approaches and techniques. At times it required a real effort to get stuck in and grapple with the various aspects of the project, but whenever I progressed a little further in some way I felt a real sense of accomplishment and personal growth.

I have been involved in the St Alban's College Journey for the entire six years of its existence, mainly as the chief organiser. I have always been aware of the tremendous potential for personal growth offered by the experience, but this research project allowed me to explore a completely new aspect that I have not considered up to now – that of increased motivation and a more positive attitude toward writing.

On reflection, my research has opened up many new avenues to explore in future. The process has focussed my attention on aspects of my practice that can be changed. For one, I have come to the realisation that even in an excellent product (as I consider The Journey to be) there is room for improvement, innovation and change.

Writing Conferencing and Mentoring: Using Senior Writing Advisors to Foster Confidence in Writing by Freshmen Boys

BECKY BROWN CHESTNUT HILL ACADEMY, PHILADELPHIA, USA

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the effectiveness of pairing older students trained in writing and conferencing skills with freshmen on a structured writing assignment. I paired senior boys who are strong writers trained to work with other students on writing assignments with freshmen boys to help them become more confident, powerful, and prolific writers through conferencing at several stages of process writing. Through surveys, free writes, discussions, focus groups, and monitoring their progress, I tried to determine how senior writing advisors could help freshmen boys become stronger writers. My research indicated that the pairing of freshmen with senior writing advisors helped freshmen feel more confident in their writing. They reported that their writing was more powerful in certain aspects. Although they were more prolific during the project, they were not necessarily likely to become more prolific writers in the future as a result of working with the writing advisors.

Research Question

How can the use of senior writing advisors help freshmen boys become more confident, powerful, and prolific writers?

Introduction

I find that boys are often shy about seeking help with a writing assignment, especially freshmen who are struggling and often not confident writers. I also observe that freshmen frequently turn in final drafts of essay assignments that are more like first drafts. While I encourage, and sometimes require, my freshmen to utilize process writing and to seek help from peers, they are often reluctant and/or unable to make time for process or help. Many freshmen boys are not engaged in the writing process. When they do seek help, they often struggle to understand what their problem areas are and sometimes are confused about the comments/feedback they have received from teachers and/or peers. If they do understand the comments/feedback, they still need help understanding how to correct errors and improve upon problem areas. Because freshmen do not

always trust that other boys their age and grade level know more or are better writers than they are themselves, they are not always confident in their peers' ability to help them; thus, peer editing with other freshmen is usually limited in effectiveness.

Before beginning this project, I hoped to encourage students to want to help each other with writing. I also looked for ways to hold them accountable during the writing process. As I was starting a new Writing Center at Chestnut Hill Academy (CHA), utilizing senior writing advisors in and out of the classroom seemed ideal in helping freshmen become more confident, powerful, and prolific writers. Action research seemed an appropriate methodology to reflect on and evaluate this idea, as action research enables educators to modify a current practice and measure the effects of the change in an ongoing and flexible manner. This method seemed an ideal way to monitor the effects of incorporating writing advisors into my teaching of writing to freshmen.

Literature Review

When approaching the original research question, I struggled to find specific, manageable, and effective methods of incorporating editing, revising, and conferencing using writing advisors with freshmen. I planned to provide younger boys with guidance from older, more competent student writers and also time to peer edit with each other. I wondered if conferencing with peers their own age as well as with older students would make freshmen feel empowered, as they could teach each other what they learned through working with writing advisors. This idea was supported by Barbara Carney (1996) in her discussion of the benefits of regularly including process writing into the classroom. Carney's argument that students feel empowered through conferencing as a result of positive feedback, constructive criticisms, and overall improvements in writing skills apply here. Her work supports the concepts and principles I had in mind when starting this project.

Carla Beachy's (1992) study illustrates the effectiveness of peer editing for students. She discussed the importance of students collaborating when writing to learn how to spot problems and prevent or correct them in their own writing. She also emphasized the significance of students feeling like "authors" and "editors" instead of merely student writers; this idea was enhanced through peer editing, as the confidence developed from feeling qualified to helping each other came from frequency and validation. While the students Beachy used in her study were all in the same class, the principles are the same: through peer editing, students improve by spotting errors or problems in writing.

Goldschmid and Goldschmid (1976) noted that if a student learns something and must teach it to another student, he will learn the material better. They also noted that peer feedback that allows for immediate "factual as well as social" (p. 13) response helps students know where they stand, and that "cooperation among students may very well be as or even more important than the direction imposed upon them by the teacher." Goldschmid and Goldschmid also emphasize that because the students in their study received immediate feedback from their peer(s) in a one-to-one manner, they were more engaged and active in their own learning, and those students who partake in peer teaching as either teacher or student become better at self-assessment, and thus more assured in their own work. They also mentioned that a decrease in competition with other students often happens when the students are meant to be helping each other (p.13). These ideas particularly interest me, as CHA is a competitive school, and I hoped to see less competition among students

as a result of the Writing Center in general and this project especially. I hoped that freshmen would learn to help each other and work with seniors without apprehension.

I also hoped that by opening the lines of communication between students, all of the boys involved would become more confident, powerful writers. Althaus and Darnall (2001) discussed the benefits of revision and peer feedback in the writing process. They noted that “without the possibility of revision... the assistance provided by comments on graded essays is limited,” and that in the peer review process, students can learn through writing (p. 23). In addition, they noted that students helping other students during the writing process was valuable to the students’ learning, and that the quality of the peer reviews was better during their study on the drafts teachers were not commenting on. Their overall findings were that “high quality peer reviews, in turn, improved the revised essays” (p. 32). By providing students with more complete feedback from older and more knowledgeable students at every stage of the writing process, I hoped that their writing would improve, that they would become more adept at noticing their own trouble spots, and that they would become less reluctant to ask for help from other students.

Due to scheduling issues, I needed to find a way to have freshmen conferencing with writing advisors without bringing them to the regularly scheduled freshmen class periods but also without demanding too much time from the writing advisors during school hours. Thus, I looked into online alternatives and the potential issues. Miller and Benz (2008) found that students using both computers and the fishbowl method were comfortable dealing with their peers and their own work, and had positive feelings towards the experiences in general. They also noted that students who commented online were more likely to make general as opposed to specific comments regarding other students’ work. Students in their study also commented on the almost immediate nature of online interaction compared to waiting for the next class period. While this was a benefit in some respects, it is important to be aware of the negatives, such as impulsive (and potentially negative) responses and very vague and generalized feedback instead of thoughtful, positive, and specific responses. By allowing or requiring the students to use technology as a medium for peer conferencing, I hoped they would become more engaged in the process, as the research literature suggested they could. In addition, as discussed by Mary Lea (2001), I could also more easily monitor the boys’ progress as well as be alert regarding plagiarism.

Research Context

Chestnut Hill Academy is a pre-kindergarten through twelfth-grade boys’ school in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It is a college preparatory school with an enrollment of approximately 520 boys. The school espouses that boys pursue excellence in four areas: character, leadership, academics, and activities, in hopes of encouraging and helping boys to become great men. CHA participates in a partnership with Springside School, a pre-kindergarten through twelfth-grade girls’ school nearby, which allows for upperclassmen to take coeducational classes in certain subjects.

As Director of the Writing Center at CHA, I aim to make it a place for students to develop the craft of writing, to better their understanding of how to improve their own writing, and to help them to become more confident writers. Writing advisors are CHA boys selected from a group of Honors and Advanced Placement English upperclassmen who have been nominated by the Upper School faculty of CHA and Springside for their writing ability and interpersonal skills. Interested

nominees interview with me (as Director) and submit a graded sample of their writing for review. During a normal school year, writing advisors spend approximately two hours per ten school days serving Writing Center shifts, as well as two hours each month in training sessions where they learn and practice revision techniques, grammar and style, and interpersonal and listening skills necessary to conduct successful conferences for various kinds of writing assignments.

Research Approach

This project, as part of the International Boys' Schools Coalition 2009–2010 Action Research program, allowed for open-minded research and analysis on my part. It also allowed the students to have more of a voice and role in the research through surveying, free writing, and discussions. Because the surveys and free writes were either anonymous or given the option to be so, the feedback from the freshmen and the writing advisors is likely more honest. Action research also allowed me the opportunity to look at my teaching analytically and to make positive changes. I used observations and students' reports of their feelings in surveys, free writes, and discussions to compile data and assess the progress of my research.

Research Plan/Data Collection

My initial idea was to pair freshmen (ages 14–15) with senior writing advisors (ages 17–18) and have them meet face-to-face during specified class periods at each stage of the writing process for a major written assessment. However, CHA adopted a new schedule at the start of the 2009–2010 school year, so none of the writing advisors were free during the periods my freshmen classes met. Instead, I paired freshmen with writing advisors, set them up on Google Docs so they could still conference with each other, and encouraged them to use the academic support time after school or their own designated times to meet face-to-face if possible.

At the start of the project (at the beginning of the first semester), the sample group was comprised of my two sections of freshmen totaling 26 boys; I decided to utilize both sections in the interest of fairness and consistency, and to ensure that I would have enough participants. At the start of the second semester, however, two freshmen left CHA, making my total 24. At CHA, freshmen are not tracked in English, so both sections of freshmen varied in ability, educational background, and work ethic. The sample group was also comprised of five senior writing advisors who worked with the freshmen, although at the start of the project, there was a sixth writing advisor who quit for personal reasons early in the process. His departure necessitated redistributing his four freshmen to the other writing advisors.

I decided to use Google Docs for this project because it would allow me to monitor the work as it records who looks at each document and when, and what changes were made and by whom. It is important to note, however, that while using Google Docs was a change in my teaching methods, the focus of my project was the use of writing advisors to help freshmen become more confident, powerful, and prolific writers. Technology served only as a tool for me, a means to continue with my plan of pairing writing advisors with freshmen for assignments.

At the start of the project, the technology coordinator came to both freshmen sections to teach them to use Google Docs and to share their work with each other, with me, and with the writing advisors;

I taught the writing advisors similarly. In order to prepare the writing advisors for this project, I continued to train them in reflective listening, and I emphasized how to use these skills in an online forum instead of the face-to-face manner they were previously used to. They were instructed to conference online as they do for face-to-face conferences. Instead of writing prescriptive comments telling the freshmen how to better their writing, I instructed them to ask questions that would help the freshmen identify and understand what is lacking in their work in hopes of improving their skills for this particular assignment as well as for future writing assignments.

At the start of the project, the freshmen filled out an anonymous survey (Appendix A) that asked them to comment on their feelings towards writing, their own ability and confidence levels, who (if anyone) they typically turn to for help when writing, and other such topics. After the first survey (as I did not want my input to influence their answers) but before any additional steps, I discussed the terms relevant to the project with the freshmen and with the writing advisors. We discussed how power and confidence are difficult to measure in writing, and that the prolific nature of their writing was typically nearly impossible for me to measure. I noted that I hoped they would consider how important their honest and thoughtful feedback would be throughout the project.

After our study of Tony Earley's novel *Jim the Boy*, I created an essay assignment with a timeline for gathering evidence, writing theses, generating outlines, writing first drafts, revising drafts, and completing final drafts, including due dates for posting these stages on Google Docs and for receiving online feedback from writing advisors. For outlines, first drafts, and revised drafts, the freshmen were also given class time to peer edit for each other. Since peer editing was a common practice in my class, continuing to use it would not affect my results.

On the day their *Jim the Boy* essays were due, I asked the freshmen to do a free write. They commented on at least one positive thing and one negative thing, what worked and what didn't, and offered suggestions regarding the experience thus far. I also asked them to comment on using Google Docs compared to face-to-face conferences, especially if they also met face to face with a writing advisor. I also asked the freshmen to comment on whether or not they felt more confident as writers. The writing advisors did a free write where they discussed the same issues.

After collecting their *Jim the Boy* essays but before returning them, as I did not want their grades influencing their answers, I had the freshmen take another anonymous survey (Appendix B). The survey asked about working with the writing advisors in general, using Google Docs, their confidence levels, and other related topics. I explained that their responses would have no impact on their grades. I returned the essays with grades and my feedback at a later date.

Next we studied William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. The remaining 24 freshmen again wrote essays at the end of the unit, but I did not require them to conference with writing advisors. They did continue the regular practices of process writing and peer editing in class. As I had done previously, I encouraged them to visit the Writing Center or ask their assigned writing advisors from the *Jim the Boy* essays to work with them, in person or using Google Docs.

After grading and returning the *Lord of the Flies* essays, I met with volunteer focus groups of freshmen. One group was comprised of six boys who chose to meet with a writing advisor on the *Lord of the Flies* essay, and the other was comprised of five boys who chose not to.

Results and Discussion

On the initial survey (Appendix A) that the freshmen filled out before beginning *Jim the Boy*, I surveyed their opinions on the importance of writing, their feelings towards their own writing skills, and their feelings about sharing their work with others. Almost every boy felt that writing is important, yet more than half of them said they do not like to write outside of school. In addition, while fewer than half said they prefer writing in collaboration with others over working alone, almost all of the freshmen said they like showing their writing to a teacher, the majority said they liked showing their writing to classmates/friends, and only 7 of the 26 freshmen said they liked sharing their writing with a writing advisor. More than half said they feel like they are competing with their peers when they write for school. When asked to circle the things that help them when they write, the majority of them answered that a choice of topics, a reason for writing, rewards (grades or other), and writing drafts were helpful.

When asked to finish the statement, “As a writer I am” by circling words from a list on the first survey (Appendix A), fewer than half circled “confident.” The fact that very few of the students circled either “mediocre” and/or “awkward” suggested varied perceptions of their own power as writers at that time, especially when considered with the number who circled “confident.” Also, only two students circled “reluctant,” which indicated a potential to foster more prolific writers.

On the free write, nearly every boy commented that the experience was positive overall. Several freshmen commented that because the writing advisors are closer to their own age, they often had an easier time understanding the feedback; the writing advisors worded things differently than teachers tend to do. The majority of the freshmen said that getting feedback during the writing process was extremely helpful and made them feel more confident about particular aspects of essay writing, especially on the *Jim the Boy* essay. In commenting on whether or not he felt more confident as a writer, one freshman wrote, “*This made me slightly more confident as a writer because I know about techniques like funneling [now],*” indicating that the feedback he received from his writing advisor helped him understand how to apply what he learned on this essay to future essays. Another boy wrote, “*I am definitely a more confident writer because I understand my weaknesses more and am able to try and correct them.*” Another commented, “*I think I am becoming a stronger writer from taking advice from my advisor and using it with everything that I write.*” Based on the feedback from many of the boys, it was clear that in one way or another, most felt more confident about writing. However, because of the weight they place on grades, most were less confident in the power they felt their writing had when they turned in the essay versus when they received the grades and feedback, though they still felt that certain aspects of their writing were more powerful.

Conversely, a few boys commented that there were aspects of working with a writing advisor that they did not like or that did not help them. For example, the boys who were originally assigned to the writing advisor who had quit all wrote that even when they were assigned to a new writing advisor, they did not always get their feedback on time or at all. This seemed to create mistrust among the reassigned freshmen in respect to their new writing advisors, despite the fact that the writing advisors were trying to catch up with these particular freshmen. A few students also remarked that they did not trust that the writing advisors knew enough to help them because they are still students, and that they would have felt more comfortable meeting with their teacher or another adult. Those boys requested, for example, that I comment on their work at times during the writing process as the writing advisors had. Probably not coincidentally, the writing advisors almost

unanimously agreed in their free writes that many of the freshmen seemed reluctant to make changes to their essays along the way. In fact, one wrote, “[the] freshmen probably didn’t trust their writing advisor or were unable to understand their points” when posted on Google Docs. A few other freshmen seemed unable to connect what they were told about their *Jim the Boy* essays to writing in general. One boy, for example, wrote that while he felt his *Jim the Boy* essay was better than it would have been had he worked on it alone, he felt that “all the writing advisor did was talk about how to make that specific essay better,” and he was unable to connect what he learned to other assignments. Thus, some freshmen seemed to be more confident about the essay but not as writers overall.

I also asked the freshmen and writing advisors to comment on using Google Docs versus face-to-face conferences. The request for scheduled face-to-face conferences in addition to using Google Docs was almost unanimous from both the freshmen and the writing advisors. The reasons most commonly cited by the freshmen in their free writes were that face-to-face meetings would help to build trust between themselves and the writing advisors and that they would be able to understand the constructive criticism and feedback more easily in a verbal discussion. These reasons were also stated by the writing advisors. It was pleasantly surprising to know that they saw the benefits of additional in-person meetings, especially considering how much of their own time they had already put into helping with the project in addition to their regular Writing Center shifts and other commitments.

After the free writes but before the freshmen wrote their essays on *Lord of the Flies*, they filled out the second survey (Appendix B), where I again asked them to consider writing in general, their feelings towards their own writing skills, and their feelings about sharing their work with others. I also asked them to speak more specifically about working with a writing advisor, peer editing, and Google Docs versus face-to-face conferencing. As the freshmen had already seen their grades on the *Jim the Boy* essays, I was nervous about how their grades would influence their confidence levels regarding their writing. In contrast to the initial survey where fewer than half circled “confident” when asked how they feel as a writer, just over half circled “confident” on the second survey. In fact, the majority commented that working with a writing advisor made them more confident about their writing. In addition, all but one boy felt that working with a writing advisor helped them write the essay, and the majority said they are more likely to seek the help of a writing advisor on a future essay.

After the second survey, the freshmen wrote *Lord of the Flies* essays for which I did not require conferencing with writing advisors. I did, however, encourage them to either meet with a writing advisor or contact one to ask for feedback on Google Docs at some stage of the process. Despite the fact that, according to the second survey, most of the freshmen felt that working with a writing advisor made them more confident about their writing, and although most said they were more likely to seek out help from a writing advisor in the future, of the twenty-four freshmen, only nine chose to confer with a writing advisor on their own (though some did so several times) while the rest did not.

In light of this information, I met with two focus groups after the *Lord of the Flies* essay was graded and returned. The first group consisted of volunteers who had chosen not to conference with a writing advisor in any way, and the second group consisted of volunteers who had chosen to meet with one. In talking with the boys who had chosen not to, I was hoping to discern an explanation

for the discrepancies between the second survey and the boys' actions with the next essay. I learned that time management was a large factor for them; without a scheduled timeline of due dates as I had given them for the *Jim the Boy* essay, they were unable to budget wisely the same amount of time for the *Lord of the Flies* essay. I also learned that some boys who are not the strongest writers in their respective sections felt that when receiving feedback from their writing advisors, they sometimes felt overwhelmed by the number of problems the writing advisors highlighted for them, despite the constructive and kind nature of the feedback. Others in this group, however, felt encouraged by the idea of improving and appreciated the help, which boosted their confidence. Also, because they were still process-writing and peer-editing in class with other freshmen, most of them felt that that feedback was sufficient. When asked why they no longer felt that conferencing with a writing advisor was as important as they seemed to at the time of the survey, they admitted that they were discouraged when their grades on the *Jim the Boy* essay were not considerably higher, although they also commented that they felt certain aspects of their writing were improved even though their overall essays may not have been. Their comments perhaps indicate that they felt specific elements of their writing were more powerful but not their writing overall.

The focus group with students who did conference with writing advisors on the *Lord of the Flies* essay was enlightening in different ways. The boys who chose to conference with writing advisors on the *Lord of the Flies* essay were, not surprisingly, the boys who are typically the most diligent students from both sections, and they all stated that they met with a writing advisor primarily because I encouraged them to do so, not because they necessarily thought it would help. Their lack of faith in the assistance of the writing advisors, however, did not seem to be a negative reflection on the writing advisors. In fact, it was perhaps the opposite in that the freshmen felt that the feedback was not prescriptive enough and they were disappointed that the writing advisors had not told them explicitly what to do to improve their essays. They acknowledged that working with writing advisors improved their writing in that they felt more able to identify problems, but they were not always able to see how to fix them. As the stronger students in the freshmen sections, these boys felt temporarily more confident when conferencing because the writing advisors tended to give them a lot of positive encouragement in addition to indicating problems. On the *Lord of the Flies* essays, several felt more confident until getting the paper back, as they also felt that grades in general are the primary reason for not feeling confident about any of their schoolwork, writing assignments included.

As a result of my requirement that they write more drafts, the freshmen in both groups recognized that they were technically more prolific writers, and although they acknowledged that they were now more likely to use process writing, they did not think that they would write more on their own in general; thus, in regards to helping the freshmen become more prolific writers, the results were ambiguous despite the increase in confidence levels and the overall sense of empowerment the freshmen expressed.

Conclusion

When considering the surveys, free writes, essays, and focus groups, my overall sense is that structured and managed conferencing between freshmen and senior writing advisors did help the freshmen become more confident, powerful, and prolific writers. Despite the fact that some did not produce essays that were tremendously better overall, most wrote essays that showed marked

improvement from previous writing assignments. In addition, although some did not feel more confident overall, almost all of the freshmen involved expressed on one or both of the surveys and/or in the free writes that they felt more confident in at least some aspect of their writing. By pairing seniors with freshmen, the freshmen seemed to benefit greatly in terms of confidence levels. Although not all of them felt more confident about their writing across the board, the majority appreciated the help, and were pleased that the seniors would take the time to read and comment on their writing. In addition, nearly all of the freshmen expressed an understanding that through conferencing with others, especially older students who are strong writers, they can learn to find and address their problem areas, engage in the writing process, and feel more confident in their work.

The results with respect to the levels of power and prolific nature of the boys' writing are not as clear or comprehensive as the results regarding confidence levels. While many of the boys were technically more prolific writers for a period of time because I required them to write more drafts, the current data do not conclusively indicate that they will be more prolific writers in the long term. Due to the significance of grades, their sense of their writing being powerful seemed curtailed, so I would have to conclude that they did not feel more powerful as writers. Feeling more confident in their writing could potentially indicate that they did feel more powerful, at least in certain aspects of their writing, as most of the boys recognized that they are more capable and thus more powerful in certain writing skills. However, feeling more powerful and being more powerful are different things; thus, my research is incomplete in this regard. Through my continued evaluation of my action in future, I hope to find more complete answers to these parts of the research question.

Implications for Practice

Moving forward, I hope to be able to implement a similar way of utilizing writing advisors to help freshmen become stronger writers through process-writing and conferencing, though I will have to consider a number of factors. In an attempt to be mindful of the time commitments of everyone involved, I did not schedule face-to-face conferences in addition to using Google Docs. As it turned out, most of the freshmen and all of the writing advisors commented that face-to-face conferences would have been useful in addition to conferencing on Google Docs. While it would certainly be more ideal to have conferences in person as well, with the current schedule at CHA and the numerous commitments of students, I do not know that it would be possible. One student suggested that the writing advisors could host something like office hours after school a few times during the writing process, which could potentially work. The majority of the freshmen and writing advisors commented that Google Docs allowed them to do things according to their own schedules, and they mostly agreed that keeping Google Docs would be a good idea, so I would not substitute one for the other.

Some of the freshmen, especially those who were reassigned to new writing advisors part way into the project, felt somewhat disadvantaged at times. One student suggested switching their pairings halfway through or from essay to essay. This switching would afford freshmen the opportunity to get feedback from multiple writing advisors and would perhaps also help keep the freshmen on task and engaged in the process, as a large number of them said on the second survey that they considered their audience in some way when writing their essays, implying concern over how their work would reflect on them to the writing advisors. However, those freshmen who might develop

a level of trust with their writing advisor would not be able to do so with one advisor in particular if the pairings were switched throughout the process. These factors will be important to consider in developing future versions of this study.

Finding ways of ensuring the freshmen stay on task is an element to address as well. Several of the freshmen at some stage did not post on Google Docs as they were supposed to do. In addition, the writing advisors expressed frustration when freshmen ignored their feedback, posted late, or did not post at all. Several writing advisors suggested stronger penalties or rewards for posting early.

Another consideration is revision. I would like to find a way to incorporate steps such as having the freshmen meet with writing advisors face-to-face to go over graded essays with written feedback from me and then having them rewrite them.

Overall, I am pleased with the results. Although I have much to think about as far as implementing this strategy in potentially more successful ways, I am also encouraged by the relative success of this research; it implies the potential for greater success in the future, and I hope that I am able to continue to find ways to foster confidence, power, and a desire to become prolific writers in boys through conferencing.

References

- Althausen, R. and Darnall, K. (2001). Enhancing critical reading and writing through peer reviews: an exploration of assisted performance. *Teaching Sociology*, 29 (1), 23–35.
- Beachy, C. (1992). Enhancing writing through cooperative peer editing. In Davidson, N & Worsham, T. eds, *Enhancing thinking through cooperative learning*, pp. 209–220. New York: Teacher College Press.
- Carney, B. (1996). Process writing and the secondary school reality: a compromise. *The English Journal*, 85 (6), 28–35.
- Dunn, S. (2000). Technology: where is it taking us? A writing perspective. *Montessori Life*, 12 (1), 34–35.
- Goldschmid, B. and Goldschmid, M. (1976). Peer teaching in higher education: a review. *Higher Education*, 5 (1), 9–33.
- Lea, M. (2001). Computer Conferencing and Assessment: new ways of writing in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 26 (2), 163–181.
- McCarthy, E. (2008). It Takes a Village to Raise a Writer. *Independent School*, 67(2), 70–79.
- Miller, R. and Benz, J. (2008). Techniques for encouraging peer collaboration: online threaded discussion or fishbowl interaction. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 35 (1), 87–93.
- Mills, G. (2007) *Action Research: A Guide for the Teacher Researcher*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Heinemann.

Appendix A

SURVEY 1

Do not put your name on this survey. Please answer all of the questions below.
Be as honest and as thorough as you possibly can be. Thank you.

1. **Writing is important.** (circle one)

strongly disagree disagree agree strongly agree

2. **Explain your choice in the best way that you can.**

3. **I prefer writing** (circle one)

alone in collaboration with others

4. **The following things help me when I write** (circle as many as are applicable)

drafts	a reason
rubric	technology
discussion	brainstorming
pressure	choice in topic
process writing	rewards (grade or other)

5. **It helps me write when I get feedback from** (circle as many as are applicable)

parents teachers writing advisors tutors friends classmates
others (please specify)

6. **As a writer I am** (circle as many as are applicable)

confident	sophisticated	mediocre	reluctant	clear
awkward	disorganized	logical	fluent	coherent

7. **I like to write outside of school.**

yes no

8. **Rank your level of engagement/enjoyment of the following writing styles with 1 being an extremely low level and 5 being an extremely high level.**

Analytical	1	2	3	4	5
Fiction	1	2	3	4	5
Nonfiction	1	2	3	4	5
Poetry	1	2	3	4	5

9. I like sharing my writing with (circle as many as are applicable)

parents teachers writing advisors tutors friends classmates
others (please specify)

10. I like to use the following technology when I write. (circle as many as are applicable)

blogging texting instant messaging podcast
power point emailing word processing
wiki pen and paper forum/chat

11. When writing I consider my audience.

always sometimes never

12. When writing for school assignments, I feel like I'm competing with my peers.

always sometimes never

13. Something I have trouble with when writing is...

14. When I write I wish I could...

15. Is there anything else you would like to say about the art of writing?

16. Explain a memorable experience involving writing that you have had.

Appendix B

SURVEY 2

Do not put your name on this survey. Please answer all of the questions below.
Be as honest and as thorough as you possibly can be. Thank you.

1. Working with a writing advisor helped me write my essay. (circle one)

strongly disagree disagree agree strongly agree

2. Explain your choice in the best way that you can.
-

3. My writing advisor was very helpful throughout the writing process. (circle one)

strongly disagree disagree agree strongly agree

4. Explain your choice in the best way that you can.
-

5. I liked using Google docs to work with a writing advisor. (circle one)

strongly disagree disagree agree strongly agree

6. Explain your answers to number 5 in the best way that you can.
-

7. In the future, I am now more likely to seek out the help of a writing advisor. (circle one)

strongly disagree disagree agree strongly agree

8. In the future I am now more likely to seek out the help of someone, but not necessarily a writing advisor. (circle one)

strongly disagree disagree agree strongly agree

9. Explain your answers to numbers 7 and 8 in the best way(s) that you can.
-

10. After going through this process, I found that the following things help me when I write (circle as many as are applicable)

drafts	a reason
rubric	technology
discussion	brainstorming
pressure	choice in topic
process writing	rewards (grade or other)

11. I now feel that it helps me write when I get feedback from (circle as many as are applicable)

parents	teachers	writing advisors	tutors	friends	classmates
others (please specify)					

12. As a writer I am (circle as many as are applicable)

confident	sophisticated	mediocre	reluctant	clear
awkward	disorganized	logical	fluent	coherent

13. When writing this paper, I considered my audience, that is, I considered my writing advisor in some way.

yes no

14. I feel that working with a writing advisor helped me to feel more confident about my writing.

yes no

15. Explain your choice in the best way that you can.

Reflection

The opportunity to conduct this research project has been invaluable. The International Boys' Schools Coalition deserves great thanks for giving teachers the opportunity to explore new teaching methods and practices that benefit students and teachers tremendously. Teaching writing is important to me, and through this project, I have found some ways of improving my ability to do so. I am also grateful that I had so much support from the CHA community throughout this project.

From a school perspective, I think this research could foster positive changes in how CHA boys understand their own writing abilities and their confidence in themselves as students and as writers. I was impressed by the conscientiousness, enthusiasm, and dedication of the writing advisors who volunteered to take part in the project. I thank them, as I couldn't have done this project as I envisioned it without their willingness to commit their time to helping younger students. If seniors are able to influence freshmen through setting a good example, I hope my freshmen were able to see the leadership and diligence these seniors demonstrated.

I also want to thank the action research team. Our leaders, Di and Margot, have my unwavering gratitude. Their encouraging words, patience, support, and willingness to be sounding boards made this project all the more meaningful and valuable for me. I could never have remained as calm and composed as I did without the help and support of my teammates on the action research team. I find it comforting to know that there are so many dedicated, thoughtful, motivated people around the world trying to make a difference. I feel fortunate to have met everyone on the team, and I look forward to keeping in touch.

Visual Image Writing Prompts

GENE BRUNER ST. CHRISTOPHER'S SCHOOL, RICHMOND, USA

Abstract

An action research project involving a group of grade 7 English students was undertaken in the last part of 2009 at a boys' school in Richmond, Virginia. The boys were exposed to various types of visual image writing prompts to discern if the visual stimuli assisted boys to become more powerful, prolific, and confident writers. Data were gathered using surveys, writing samples and individual discussions. The findings suggested the following: The project did not provide a measurable increase in the proliferation of writing beyond the English classroom. However, the students displayed increased motivation to excel with class assignments and exhibited improved confidence with their perceived writing ability. The students demonstrated alacrity in completing assignments and expressed interest in pursuing future class projects.

Introduction

The creative act owes little to logic or reason. Indeed, it seems to occur most readily when the mind is relaxed and the imagination roaming freely.

Morris Kline, mathematician

This action research project sought to investigate the following question: *How can visual image writing prompts help boys become prolific, powerful, and confident writers?* A “powerful” writer, in the context of this project, is considered to be a student who possesses the skills to communicate his ideas effectively and is attuned to the mechanics of writing. A “confident” writer responds to assignments with a sense of purpose and direction. He demonstrates a sense of pride in his work and appears assured that the work he has put forward is the best effort that he could muster. A “prolific” writer senses writing as a strength, and he possesses a willingness to write at school, at home, and for projects beyond the normal scope of teacher generated assignments.

I was drawn to this topic by my own curiosity, and I was particularly interested to see if the techniques I have employed over the past two decades possessed merit. At the start of each school year, my beginner writers did not find writing particularly easy or enjoyable. It required concerted effort to organize thoughts, connect to a thematic plan, and compose a workable draft. Interestingly, once the novice had been through the process, he did not need to repeat it. This suggested that the neural processes of storytelling became hardwired into the subconscious, much as the ability to ride a bicycle. Since this early stage clicked for some faster than it did for others, I suspected that those

who found it easiest to write had previously exhibited success and felt as if their efforts were valued; they already possessed confidence. For those expressing reluctance, providing a stimulus that made their ideas valuable and accessible was significant. I felt that the use of visuals benefitted writers by offering a non-linguistic means of expression. Visuals allowed the students to step back, reflect, and have something significant to communicate regardless of their writing skills.

I felt that using visual images as writing prompts would provide the link between traditional writing and the digital world that the students are immersed in outside of class (i.e., television, movies, and the internet). Nothing beats a story, and students rested easy when told that they would be writing narrative. Accordingly, the boys were instructed on what pitfalls to avoid. Each assignment (with the exception of the journal) possessed a detailed writing component (student generated compositions consisting of at least three paragraphs) and an opportunity to revise their written work. Students understood the differences between writing a composition for a grade and writing for distinction.

The current study strives to connect research that has focused on the affective domains of learning (motivation, attitudes) with the existing pedagogy (boys and writing).

Literature Review

Several studies have revealed that boys are reluctant to write (Tooley, 2007). This hesitance is especially pronounced during the middle school years (Blair, 2004). Also, performance and repetition of basic writing errors created a potential for student anxiety (Powers & Hagaman, 2009).

However, the boys' attitudes toward writing were significantly influenced by the writing topic and type of writing task (Jones, 2007). Merisuo-Strom (2006) focused on pre-teen boys when she investigated the relationship between reading and writing attitudes. In this study, boys performed significantly better on assignments that they found interesting and thought-provoking. Coincidentally, today's students are bombarded by visual images through television, billboards, and electronic media. Students live in a visual world, the world of the "screenager". Filmmaker, Martin Scorsese (cited in Cruickshank, 2006), commented that teaching visual literacy is essential "because so much in today's society is communicated visually and even subliminally... young people have to know that this way of communicating is a very, very powerful tool" (p. 2).

Wilkinson (2006) implemented specific writing strategies, prompts, and sharing opportunities in elementary classrooms. Using visual images as prompts was shown to increase boys' motivation, engagement, and performance with writing assignments. In addition, the relationship between background knowledge, thematic interest, and narrative writing skill was studied by Benton, Corkill, Sharp *et al.* (1995). Accordingly, interest levels were enhanced.

Bruning & Horne (2000) suggested four clusters of conditions as keys to improving motivation and developing a sense of confidence.

1. **Goal Setting.** It is important to set goals in order to gain confidence. For example, the novice writer may find it useful to maintain a journal to accumulate ideas, reinforce successful behavior, and nurture functional beliefs about writing and the discipline needed to acquire a writing skill set. A goal of making a journal entry every day provides a worthwhile and doable first step.

2. **Shaping.** The teacher should be the chief “condition” for effective writing and should write with his or her students. Additionally, this is the process in which a target behavior is broken down into a series of steps that eventually achieved a desired work pattern such as (1) allocating a certain amount of time during the day to write; (2) deciding what time of day this behavior is best achieved; (3) creating an environment that provides writing tools, time, and models; and (4) sharing work and collaborating with peers outside of the classroom.
3. **Positive Reinforcement.** This is the process in which students are reinforced with a positive, emotional environment. This process establishes an atmosphere where good writing habits are valued. Writers require an audience, and the more positive input that was drawn from this social interaction, the easier it becomes to keep writing.
4. **Stimulus Controls.** The introduction of stimulus controls to prompt or encourage creativity. At all stages of the assignments, the boys were assisted with some visual component with the idea that it would increase their desire to compose essays and writer based projects. When learning with multimedia the brain must simultaneously encode two different types of information, an auditory stimulus and a visual stimulus. One might expect that these competing sources of information would tend to overwhelm or overload the learner. However, psychological research has shown that verbal information is in fact better remembered when accompanied by a visual image.

Multimodal instruction involving learning from both text and pictures has been demonstrated to improve learning in contrast with single-modal instruction through written instruction only (Gellevij, Van-der-Meij, deJong & Pieters, 2002). This corroborates dual-coding theory and demonstrated that the subjects’ working memories were not overloaded by the addition of visuals. In a study with undergraduate teacher education students, training time was faster when the multimodal approach was implemented.

Individual differences were noted and it was mentioned that teachers should make accommodations to provide more concrete experiences and more practice with generalizing concepts for those students who need assistance. These guiding principles still hold wisdom for educators today.

Weaver and Bollinger (1949) detailed characteristics of good visual aids which could be used as a measurement. While most of their ideas focus on graphic design, accuracy, and clarity, their initial point stated that a good visual “should explain an abstract idea, show a relationship, or present a sequence of procedure that cannot be explained without it”. They offer suggestions for teachers when using visual aids, including reminders to use the visuals as aids and not to expect the visuals to instruct by simply showing them. Although this guide was written several decades ago, the basic principles and purposes of visuals have not changed. Modern advances in technology and changes in communication using technology provide even more for educators to consider when planning effective instruction. The three levels of visual communication are listed as passive, neutral, and active imagery. Passive images are not clear in their focus, or confuse the viewer because of contradictory visual information. Neutral images are more focused and have a simple background so that the selected image will stand out. Active images are noted for having strong visual elements, such as line or color; active images tell a story.

Gangwer (2009) describes the visual teacher as one who uses images to improve student learning. The visual teacher has students evaluate both still and moving images and the symbols used within

these media. The visual teacher creates assignments that reflect the methods of visual learning and allow students to apply and demonstrate visual thinking. The visual teacher provides feedback to students concerning images they have created, based on the methods of visual learning.

Lastly, the poet John Lipman inserted the use of 'translytic poems' in his class. Translytic poems interpret a pictogram or a foreign text on the basis of the image itself. The poems did not serve as a literal translation and encouraged the student to derive meaning from what they consider meaningless. When students were presented with a visual image and with a task of 'translation', this exercise provided a sense of safety in the writing process. The original piece, which acted as a writing prompt, did not belong to the student. The distance the student has from the original text decreases the fear of expression (Corso, 2006).

The use of visual prompts could be seen as an effective tool to meet these challenges head-on. A second question I needed to address was collaboration. Boys are hesitant to offer genuine reflection out of fear of being demonized by their larger (more muscular) peers or having their efforts trivialized under the rigors of structured writing rubrics. However, when students are encouraged to create non-traditional presentations – repetition with variety – a group effort creates an atmosphere of trust and commitment, and it promotes student engagement and cognitive alacrity.

Research Context and Sample

My research was carried out at Saint Christopher's School in Richmond, Virginia. The school is a college preparatory school for boys (junior kindergarten through 12th grade).

I conducted my research amongst a group of 7th grade (aged 12–13) boys in my English class (three classes of 15). My group worked within the normal time constraints of the daily schedule that met five days per week. Though the classes also included elements of literature and grammar, the bulk of the cycle was devoted to the writing project. Their works were assessed and their responses were recorded. Prior to the cycle, parents and students were given information about the action project, and parent permission forms were presented. All student work was marked for content, organization, and grammar usage. Students were given ample time to react and respond to assignments and assessments.

Data Collection

Individual student conference/interviews: Conferences with each student were held at the beginning of the action research and after the cycle was completed. In both sets of interviews, students were asked to rank their language arts strengths. Students were afforded an opportunity to discuss their reaction to the writing assignments offered. Individual interviews with students were completed. And, as a follow-up, three small groups (5–6 students) were assembled and discussed the various facets of the writing program and their perceived growth as writers. Also, they were asked which characteristics of the prompts worked best for them.

Surveys: Pre-surveys and post-surveys were undertaken by the 45 students on their attitudes toward writing at the beginning of the school year in September and at the end of the cycle. Each writing assignment was surveyed using a Likert scale (See attached).

Rubric Analysis: Writing Practice Program (WPP) was employed for select students as a self-assessment Rubric tool. The Rubric was based on six criteria: Overall Development, Organization, Support, Sentence Structure, Word Choice, and Mechanics. Students assessed themselves accordingly: Superior – 6, Strong – 5, Adequate – 4, Limited – 3, Weak – 2, and Inadequate – 1.

Journal/reflection: I maintained a journal of field notes, assignments, and conversations with students, parents, and fellow faculty.

The Intervention

The focus of the writing assignments allowed students to feel as if they were writing for a magazine geared toward an audience of young men about their age with a myriad of interests. The writing prompts included a visual stimulus to encourage discussion and background knowledge. In addition, the topics were current and appealed to the boys' culture. Gangwer (2009) encourages teaching critical visual thinking to inspire creativity and encourage divergence. By having students identify and evaluate visual evidence, or teaching students to think critically with pictures, logical thinking and reasoning skills could be developed. After the assignments, the boys were encouraged to submit responses of their own for extra credit. Mostly, the students took advantage of opportunities of re-writing and revising their work to include in their portfolio. And in some cases, students responded with visual creations of their own (flow-charts, industrial maps, graphs, and digital-video slideshows commonly referred to as "mashes").

The boys were exposed to six different assignment sessions outlined below.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MOVIE TRAILER

The first day of class, the boys viewed a 30-second clip of a young man in the grade above them. The clip, produced by the *Animoto*TM application, included still images of the boy enjoying his hobbies as well as background music of his own choosing. Following the presentation, students openly discussed the individual, and many were unaware of his interests and passions as demonstrated through the images. Next, the class learned how to produce a video clip of their own, and a group effort had a second clip completed by the end of class that first day. The boys had two days to create an autobiographical movie trailer of their own. Students were given passwords to submit and save their presentations at *Animoto*. Subsequently, the students' first writing assignment was an autobiographical written essay answering the question: Who are you?

THE PRANK ESSAY

For this assignment, students viewed storyboards of humorous scenes from various media: *The Far Side* and *Spy vs. Spy*. The general theme of the images implied a prank or practical joke. The students had to describe the humor behind the image. The boys were then assigned to write a story based on a prank or practical joke.

THE LEGO – PROCESS ESSAY

Students were placed in groups of four and given a class period to build a project of their choosing using plastic *Legos*. No instructions were to be followed, and at the end of the class, a picture was taken of the final product. The next day, students were to write out instructions to build their

group's design. Next, the instructions were handed to the other groups and the students' were to build the design based on the instructions. The final project needed to resemble the picture taken of the product on the first day of the assignment.

THE HORROR STORY

Horror writer Don Mancini – the creator of the *Child's Play* movies – provided images of traditional villains and monsters, and he discussed similarities in horror story plot lines. Students composed an essay based on a villain of their own creation. The story had to follow a writing formula based on a horror story.

COMMERCIAL: PRODUCT DESIGN AND ADVERTISEMENT

Students were instructed on Aristotle's three methods of persuasion: Ethos, Pathos, and Logos. The students viewed print media advertisements and categorized each ad based on the method of persuasion employed. Groups of five were formed, and each group invented a product and advertising campaign. Each group presented a script and produced a digital video with audio and graphics promoting the features and benefits of the product.

JOURNAL ASSIGNMENT

A journal was maintained throughout the cycle. At one point, students were given a stimulus that they were to respond to in their journal. After each individual stimulus was presented, the students immediately recorded their reaction/response in their journal. Day 1 consisted of listening to 10–15 second sound clips. On Day 2, the students were given cups with assorted flavored candies and they were to respond to the tastes (eyes closed). And on Day 3, the boys were presented with 100 still image slides. On several occasions, image-based prompts were used during unstructured, free-writing exercises.

Research Results

During the pre-writing interviews, students were asked to indicate their attitudes toward writing. Initially, the majority presented a reluctance to discuss their writing history, and only a very small percentage viewed writing as a strength. A myriad of explanations were given, but ultimately the same fears were implied: *"I can't write"*, *"I don't like to write"*, and *"I get bad grades when I write."* Several expressed that they would prefer to be assessed on short-answer and multiple-choice exercises. When asked what could prompt them to become less reluctant, most replies indicated that they responded best when there is less risk of failure. When asked to list one piece of writing in which they felt success, most students indicated a narrative written in the lower school.

Post-writing interviews indicated an improved outlook, and there was evidence of students emerging as prolific, powerful, and confident writers. Given the responses of the students during conferences, observations at school, and student surveys, the use of visual image stimuli had a limited effect on the boys' perception of being prolific writers. The only positive link that could be addressed is that most boys viewed writing as an academic strength for them, and they found the program enjoyable. In addition, 19 of the 45 boys still maintained a writing journal well after the assignment had concluded. One student commented: *"I get to write about whatever I want whenever I want. Plus, I own it."* Most significant was the jump in enrollment for a creative writing

course offered in grade 8. 39 of the 45 students involved in the project registered to take creative writing as an elective.

According to the responses of the students during conferences and in student surveys, the use of visual image stimuli had a genuine effect on the boys becoming powerful writers. The writing assignments made the boys aware of the responsibility to demonstrate more self-pride and, more importantly, self-discipline. As with any skill that one has acquired, the more effort that went into its acquisition and the more difficulties the student overcame, the more rewarding the result. Students also demonstrated a heightened degree of self-expectation (*"I thought it was an A effort"*). Moreover, the impact on length and quality of their submissions was profound. Beyond each academic peak was another peak waiting to be tackled, and the students demonstrated the ability to communicate effectively and were mindful to the mechanics of writing. One student mentioned:

"I have trouble with all the grammar and punctuation rules, and I can't spell. But, cleaning up the mistakes heightened the rewards. The more I put into it, the more I liked doing it. I could achieve whatever academic target I set for myself as long as I put in the effort."

Lastly, given the responses of the students during conferences, the use of visual image stimuli had a substantial effect on the boys' confidence. For a start, visual prompts provided individual and original thought – whatever the stimuli, the student had an irrefutable individual reaction completely separate from those of his peers. Visual image stimuli provided mileposts to refer back to as landmarks. Where one image may have been underwhelming for one student, it may have been rewarding for another. The point was reached where visual prompts drove students to react with a clearer perspective of what the theme meant to the individual. The boys took ownership of the assignments and were eager to present their best effort. In addition, the incorporation of visual writing prompts created an atmosphere for creativity, relaxation, and play. The boys looked forward to the openness of the class, be it physical, academic, or spiritual. Thinking took place. They pointed to the creative atmosphere as a spur to come to class and perform well, especially the activities necessary for the creative act to occur, for new ideas to appear apparently from nowhere, and for old-established ideas to take on a new meaning. One student said:

"I liked this assignment because I could play around with some things. The directions were looser, but I liked that it was easier to write about what we did."

Also, the use of visual images allowed for students to become more detailed in their understanding of the information. Common sense could not be faked, and the student had no one else to blame when a lack of knowledge was present. Visual images motivated the need to recognize the importance of going beyond the confines of one's own personal experience while admitting imperfection. The boys learned to test themselves – not by themselves, but also in the company of others – and expand on details and description in their written work.

"My older sister saw my essay on the computer and read it without me knowing it. She asked me to read her essay and give her some advice. I told her to avoid the verb "to be" and use more details and description. And guess what? She did."

Conclusion

The biggest worry for me was accurately portraying the events of the past year in an even-handed and straightforward manner. I hoped that my excitement for what I do and how I did it would not come off as disingenuous, and that I would have the wherewithal and expertise to present the data in a reliable fashion. It was clear that the boys enjoyed the project and were willing participants in each assignment. Most reported “favorable” reactions to visual prompts.

Enjoying an assignment, especially the ones involving working with a group of friends and using technology, garnered the most attention from the students. The scripting, planning, shooting, and editing the video drew the most praise. In addition, the boys arranged after-school time and weekends to complete their projects. Accordingly, most referenced the visual projects that they presented and not the visuals prompted by the teacher. Perhaps the student is so immersed in a visual world, that the expectation for visual prompts is now a given expectation.

Further extension of the study in the future could include a reciprocal approach to the assignments where the students are given written cues and most respond with visual responses to support their written work. Allowing students to control the visual prompt may be more influential to promoting writing among boys.

References

- Andrzejczak, N., Tranin, G., & Poldberg, M. (2005). From image to text: Using images in the writing process. *International Journal of Education and the Arts*, 6 (12). Retrieved April 26, 2010 from <http://www.ijea.org/v6n12/index.html>
- Benton, S.L., Corkil, A.J., Sharp, J., Downey, R. & Khramtsova, I. (1995). Knowledge, Interest, and Narrative Writing. *The Journal of Educational Psychology*, 87, 66–70.
- Blair, H & Sanford, K (2004). Morphing literacy: reshaping their boys-based Literacy Practices. *Language Arts*. July, 81 (6), 452–460.
- Bruning, E. & Horne, C. (2000). Developing Motivation to Write. *Educational Psychologist*, Vol. 35, 2000.
- Corso, A. (2006). That's So Gay: Rethinking Writing Poetry in an All Male Secondary Classroom. *International Journal of Learning*, 2005/2006, 12 (10), 167–174.
- Cruickshank, D. (2006). Martin Scorsese: Teaching visual literacy. Retrieved March 31, 2010 from <http://www.edutopia.org/print/2848>
- Gangwer, T. (2009). *Visual impact, visual teaching: Using images to strengthen learning*, 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Gellevij, M., Van-der-Meij, H., deJong, T., & Pieters, J. (2002). Multimodal versus unimodal instruction in a complex learning context. *Journal of Experimental Education*. EJ 651451. Retrieved March 26, 2010 from ERIC database.
- Graves, D. (1994) *A Fresh Look at Writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Hidi, S. & Harackiewicz, J. (2000). Motivating the academically unmotivated: A critical issue for the 21st century. *Review of Educational Research*, Summer, 70 (2), 151–179.
- Hoban, C., Hoban, C., & Zisman, S. (1937). *Visualizing the curriculum*. New York: The Cordon Company.
- Howell, B. (2008). Literacy, subjectivity, and the gender divide: “The freedom of writing implies the freedom of the citizen (Sartre)”. *Gender and Education*, September, 20(5), 511–525.
- Jones, S. (2007). Composing in the style of Mozart: An exploration of the ‘struggling boy writer’ comparing the composing process and strategies of boys and girls. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, May, 6 (1), 97–112.
- Landon, B. (2005). *The Visual Learning Style as a Kaleidoscope*. Douglas College Psychology Department. Retrieved March 25, 2010 from <http://eideneurolearningblog.blogspot.com/2005/02/visual-learning-style-askaleidoscope>.
- Merisuo-Storm, T. (2006). Girls and boys like to read and write different texts. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 50 (2), 111–125.
- Sadoski, M., Kealy, W., Goetz, E., & Paivio, A., (1997). Concreteness and imagery effects in the written composition of definitions. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 89(3), 518–526.
- Taylor, D. (2003). The ‘cool’, ‘un-cool’ influence of the school ethos on boys’ achievement. *Education Journal*, June, Issue 31, 7–8.
- Tooley, S. & White, A. (2007). *An Image is Worth...How Many Words?* Western Kentucky University.
- Weaver and Bollinger (1949). *Visual Aids: Their Construction and Use*. Toronto: Van Nostrand Company.
- Wilkinson, R. G. (2005). *The impact of inequality: How to make sick societies healthier*. New York: New Press, 2005.
- Younger, M. (2007). Closing the Gender Gap? Issues of gender equity in English secondary schools. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, June 2007, Vol.28.

Appendix A

The survey, administered by the school librarian and learning specialists, was done digitally. Boys were assured that their responses would be completely anonymous:

- The advertising and Animoto projects received the majority of the “highly favorable” responses.
- The Lego-Process assignment received the majority of the “unfavorable” responses.
- The enjoyment associated with music while writing was scattered into a reverse “bell curve”.
- Students found the creating videos to be more fun even though they earned higher grades on the written assignments.
- Students found the video project more satisfying even though they thought the process of creating a script, working in a group, and story-boarding were harder.
- The students did not like to read aloud.
- The students did not like anyone else to read their writing aloud.
- The students did, however, believe they “gain as writers” by listening to peers compositions. (mode=3, followed by 4)
- The students did believe that they “gain as writers” by listening to the teacher read work aloud. (mode=4, followed by 5)

ADDITIONAL SURVEY COMMENTS

- *What I really liked about this year’s English was all the video stuff. I also enjoyed going outside and working.*
- *I checked off that I had received a higher grade on my essay and written assignment, but I got A’s on both the video and the essay.*
- *I believe that it would be great to have a video-making class or session. It is very helpful in the real world today.*
- *I hated the Lego project because it was too hard.*
- *I think there should be more instructions on filming.*
- *I think teachers should emphasize teaching kids how to create videos because I know for me it is more fun than writing essays and I think it will give more people a fun time while learning.*
- *I thought the Lego essay was really fun because we got to build something instead of just writing. We actually got to do something more fun than just sitting and writing.*
- *I prefer to do an Animoto because it was more fun to find images and write instead of just writing a five paragraph essay. I learned just as much by making an Animoto with pictures and text slides, as I would if I would have had to write an essay.*
- *I did not like the essays at first, but I liked being allowed to write a re-write. They actually made me work.*
- *I kept my journal going so I could write in my room. I was still allowed to listen to music.*

Less is More? A Study of the Impact of Selective Correction on Writing by ESL Boys

ALVIN CHOW ST PAUL'S COLLEGE, HONG KONG, CHINA

Abstract

In Hong Kong, marking student writing puts teachers in a position where they need to identify and correct all errors made by their students in their writing. This is certainly a laborious and, at times, a fruitless process because students tend to make the same errors again and again, despite their teachers' toil and sweat. When presented with heavily marked work buried in shades of red, students' confidence and interest in writing are dampened. The less confident they are, the more errors they may have in writing, and the more drudgery teachers have to go through when marking writing. Is there way out of this vicious circle?

This action research project served to investigate whether the way the teacher treats errors impacts upon writing by students learning English as a second language (referred to as "ESL students" hereafter in this report). In particular, the research project studied the issues of ESL students' ability to develop greater control of their own language, students' enhanced confidence in writing as a result of their ability to assume such greater control and whether students wrote more as a result. The research findings suggest that selective correction by the teacher may help ESL students improve their writing and their attitudes towards writing.

Research Question

How does selective correction by the teacher help ESL students become more confident, powerful and prolific in writing?

Introduction

Error treatment in ESL writing is a complex area in the study of English Language Teaching (ELT). In general, there are two common types of error treatment. It can be done comprehensively, which means all errors are highlighted by the teacher; or it can be done selectively, which means the teacher focuses on a few selected language areas when he/she marks student writing.

There is another dimension to the issue of error treatment: what role should the student play? Ferris' classification of feedback sheds light on this issue (2005). She points out that there are two types of feedback: direct and indirect. Direct feedback means that "if students are revising or

rewriting their papers after receiving teacher feedback, they are expected merely to transcribe the teacher's suggested corrections into their texts" (Ferris, 2005, p. 19). Indirect feedback, on the other hand, happens "when the teacher indicates that an error has been made but leaves it to the student writer to solve the problem and correct the error" (p. 19). Ferris' classification suggests that direct feedback turns the student into a passive learner who is on the receiving end of the teacher's feedback, while indirect feedback gives the student a role to play in the error treatment process by getting him/her to reflect on his/her errors and solve them, instead of being told what and how to correct (Ferris, 2005, p. 19). Comprehensive marking in Hong Kong tends to follow the lines of direct feedback.

Much has been written about comprehensive marking, its drawbacks and ESL teachers' and students' reactions to it. Lee (2004) analyses the findings of a survey of 206 Hong Kong teachers' error correction practices, revealing that 72 percent of the teachers surveyed marked student errors comprehensively. The article also gives a statistical analysis of teachers' corrections, indicating that while 57 percent of their corrections were accurate, 40 percent of them were unnecessary, and "some of the teacher feedback was found to be misleading because it created errors as a result" (Lee, 2004, p. 293).

What happens at St Paul's College seems to conform to Lee's (2004) findings. A survey at the start of this action research project to gauge students' attitudes towards writing revealed that they believed they made the same mistakes again and again even though their teachers marked their writing comprehensively. However, while these findings only describe the fact that ESL students make errors when writing, they do not quite explain why ESL students make errors in the first place. While sometimes what Ferris (2005) calls "benign neglect" of errors happens (p. 4), at the end of the day, teachers need to deal with student errors as they may affect overall clarity of writing. Also, in an examination-driven society like Hong Kong, any benign neglect of errors may become malignant neglect of errors as students may lose marks in public examinations.

As a result of the focus on examination success, Hong Kong teachers spend a lot of time on grammar teaching. It is so important that grammar teaching seems to be a stand-alone subject, independent of other key skills in English Language teaching and learning. However, it is possible for a Hong Kong student to do extremely well in a grammar test, but still make numerous grammatical errors in writing. As one of my students told me on one occasion, "I find myself repeating the same mistakes in writing".

The literature and my own experience prompted me to consider whether, if the marking method that I previously used could not only be unnecessary but also misleading and so time-consuming and consequently not benefitting my students, the only sensible course of action would be to switch to another marking method. The method that I conceived would be one that would require the teacher to mark less, but at the same time help students improve their writing (and in the long-run their overall language proficiency, independence and confidence) by encouraging them to assume greater control of the language in their own writing.

I believe that such control is a sign of a student's power as a writer. With such power, I believe he will have more confidence in his own ability to write well. And if a student writer is confident, he will not be afraid of writing, and hopefully he will write more. The design of this research project was a manifestation of my understanding of the relationship between confidence, power and prolificacy.

Seen in this light, students' power as a writer stems from their confidence. In my view, confidence means:

- students' willingness to write more, despite the possibility of errors
- students' ability to enhance accuracy in language areas selected by the teacher

As the above definition shows, confidence is bound up with prolificacy (willingness to write more), as well as powerfulness (ability to have control over their own language).

Methodology

I chose to undertake action research because I believed I could incorporate it into my teaching schedule. Since my research focus was marking, and marking (whatever the method of marking) was something that I had to do as a teacher, I could keep my teaching schedule and conduct action research at the same time. Such a seamless incorporation also gave the added benefit of immediate evaluation of the practice I was experimenting with.

Research Context

This action research project was conducted at St Paul's College, Hong Kong. The very first school founded in the then British Colony of Hong Kong in 1851, St Paul's is an Anglican boys' school with a population of about 1000 students between the ages of 11 and 18 from Forms 1 to 7. Although ours is a school for local Chinese boys who learn English as their second language, St Paul's College is an Anglo-Chinese school, which means our boys learn most of their subjects (except for the Chinese Language and Chinese History) in English, unlike most other schools in Hong Kong where Chinese (or Cantonese) is the medium of instruction. Compared with most other schools in Hong Kong, the boys have better performance in English Language, as shown by their examination results in the major public examinations.

Writing is an important part of the English curriculum of St Paul's College. Each year, our boys need to write eight to ten English compositions of 300 to 500 words. Like language teachers in most other schools in Hong Kong, we adopt a comprehensive marking method, which means we try to mark all student errors each time our students have done some writing. Students recopy the parts that their teachers have corrected for them in the post-writing stage.

There are about 33 students in each class. For some subjects, such as English, students at similar ability level are "streamed" into small groups. The students participating in this action research project were drawn from a Form 4 (Year 10) English group of 20 boys. The group was one of the weakest in Form 4.

Data Collection and Actions Implemented

Conscious of the need to ensure the validity of the findings and to get a more complete picture of the impact of selective correction on student writing, I adhered to the principle of triangulation. Data collection methods included surveys, interviews with individual students and written work submitted by the boys (which included work they did in class, at home and their examination scripts).

At the beginning of the school term, I asked the students in my target group to do some diagnostic writing. It helped me come up with some language items that the students would be focusing on when doing future writing tasks.

I identified the following language problems in my students' diagnostic writing:

- Verb Tense (The Present, Past, Perfect, and Continuous Tenses)
- Plural and Singular Nouns
- Spelling
- Parts of Speech (e.g., "success", "succeed" and "successful")
- Adjectives (e.g., "interested" vs "interesting")

Of the above language problems, I choose to focus on the present and past tenses because the students had learnt the present and past tenses before. I assumed, therefore, they should find them familiar and easy to handle when they were asked to self-correct mistakes related to the two tenses. According to Harmer (2004), if students are familiar with what they have to do in writing, "they will pay a great deal of attention to the area earmarked for the teacher's correction" (p. 110).

Familiarity is also an important consideration because students make mistakes in the absence of knowledge of some aspects of grammar. The absence of such knowledge also means that some ESL students "struggle with applying teacher feedback to their writing" (Ferris and Roberts, 2001, p. 167). To maximise students' self-correction, which was one of the objectives of this action research project, it was necessary for me to ensure that the students were familiar with what they would need to handle in writing. Furthermore, given the small scale of this action research project and the brief research period, I thought it best to ask the students to tackle the familiar so that the actions I was going to implement could also serve as confidence boosters. In other words, my assumption was that if my students could get the hang of the language items prescribed by me, they would have more confidence in writing.

In addition to diagnostic writing, I also interviewed five students and required every student in my group (all twenty) to complete a questionnaire to find out about their attitudes towards writing in English and what they thought about the traditional way (comprehensive marking) their previous teachers use to mark compositions.

The data collected showed that the students were generally negative about writing because they believed that they made many mistakes when writing. Also, they thought that they made the same mistakes again and again even though their previous teachers marked their work comprehensively. Such data were very important for two reasons. First, I wanted to see if my students' attitudes would change as a result of my actions. Also, such data helped further shape the actions I was going to implement. Indirectly, my students had a say in how they should learn to write. I thought that letting my students develop a sense of ownership of their writing lessons could help boost their interest and confidence in writing.

As mentioned above, my students thought that they made the same mistakes repeatedly in writing. Consequently, I designed my writing tasks in such a way as to help my students make fewer mistakes and get the present and past tenses right. I had in mind an approach that would see an

integration of the two language items into the teaching of writing. This approach is what Thornbury (2000) considers as “Communicative Language Teaching [which] involves knowing how to use...language to achieve communicative goals” (p. 18). In other words, I wanted my students to learn the language items I prescribed in order to use them (in writing).

Throughout the action research period, my students did a series of writing tasks. In October, the students wrote a story in which they had to be aware to use the past tense when narrating events and the present in dialogue. I told them that their language would be assessed on the basis of how accurately they used the present and the past tenses.

In early February, I asked the students to write a video game review. They learnt that reviews were generally writing in the present tense, especially when it came to describing features, but they should use the past tense if they wanted to recount specific past personal experiences of playing their video games.

Before the Easter holidays, my students also did a piece of argumentative writing explaining whether they thought Hong Kong should bid for future international multi-sports events. They learnt that they should use the present tense when expressing opinions (e.g., “I think...”, “We believe...”, “I hope...”).

In addition to the above regular compositions, I also asked my students to answer open-ended responses about magazine/newspaper articles. Such tasks required the students to use the two verb tenses.

Not only did my students focus only on the two verb tenses when writing, but I also focused only on them when marking their work. I only highlighted mistakes to do with the two tenses without using any marking codes, and they were expected to correct those highlighted mistakes themselves. I added the element of self-correction because of my interpretation of power and confidence: the acid test of a powerful and confident ESL writer is whether he thinks he can, and whether he actually can, take control over his language when he is writing.

Results and Discussion

Throughout the action research period, I kept track of my students’ progress and performance in writing. Towards the end of the research project, I also asked them what they thought about their own writing during the research period. During this period, the students also took a writing examination, which was the school’s mid-year examination, independent of this research project. The examination and my observations during the research project gave rise to some findings that shed light on the issues of confidence, power and prolificacy of ESL student writers.

While the students did not always get the present and past tenses right, most of them were able, despite my minimal intervention, to correct mistakes related to the two tenses, in keeping with the spirit of the method of selective correction. Before the students attempted a writing task during the action research period, I asked them to think what language items they would need to use, and in almost all cases, they could identify the need to use the two tenses. I believed it was their increasing awareness of the use of the language items that helped them to have better control of the two language items in writing and to correct themselves after writing. During my interviews with some

of my students towards the end of the action research project, they responded by saying that now they thought they had more confidence in their ability to handle the two tenses in writing, and also thought they now made fewer mistakes related to the tenses. Here are some of my students' views about their ability:

Student A: I think the two tenses are not difficult, because I now know how to use them in writing.

Student B: I still don't always get the two verb tenses right, but instead of my teacher correcting everything for me, now I need to think about how to correct mistakes related to the two tenses.

Student C: I have actually written less, which is a good thing! Because of that, I can focus on my language more easily.

As mentioned above, the boys in the target group took their mid-year examination in January. The boys were required to write 250 words on one of the two prescribed topics: a blog entry describing a new flat or a letter of advice to a new student. Feedback from the markers (I was not a marker) showed that the boys did have their fair share of grammatical problems, but they did not seem to have problems with the present and past tenses. These findings suggest that self-correction did empower at least some students to take greater charge of their own language, and it worked as a confidence booster for them.

I considered prolificacy in terms of whether students wrote more than was required. Each writing task in the research period came with a minimum number of words the students had to write. In most cases, the students wrote more than was required. Even more encouraging was the students' performance in their mid-year examination. The majority of the students wrote more than the minimum number of words required, which was 250 words. Almost all their scripts ran to the 300–350 word range, and a few to even 400 words. When asked whether this was due to the selective correction method I used, the students said it had more to do with the fact that the topics were familiar to them, though they were quite positive about the selective correction method because they needed to do less correction themselves! It could be argued that selective correction alone may not be enough to help students become prolific writers, but that ensuring that writers are familiar with their writing topics also matters.

Conclusions and Implications for Practice

1. **Incorporation of grammar teaching into teaching of writing:** ESL students do make errors in writing, and this action research project was not designed to stop them from doing so. But if we teachers do not help students see the link between grammar and writing, and at the same time blame them for making errors, would such an accusation be a valid one? So, there is a need to help students see such a link so that they will be more aware of their grammar knowledge when writing. With such awareness, students may stand a better chance of making fewer errors. And it should be pointed out that students should develop self-awareness, not being told what errors to avoid. Only if students are in control of their language when writing can they be considered powerful writers.

2. **Design of writing tasks:** Allied to the above point is how teachers should design writing tasks. Beyond any doubt, teachers should activate students' schemata or existing knowledge through a writing task, but teachers should go the extra mile by helping students become more aware of the language that should be used for a particular writing task or situation. At the same time, writing tasks or situations should be designed to help students use a particular language item that is being taught. For example, I asked my students to write film reviews, which are normally written in the present tense, which was one of the targeted language items for my project.
3. **More is less and less is more:** At the outset of the action research project, I had in mind a new marking method that could help teachers do less. But as the action research project proceeded, I discovered that students, especially weaker students, should be asked to do less each time so that they can really concentrate on application of their grammar knowledge and error correction, or at least correction of errors related to the language items being taught. If students are required to write too much, it is hard for them to activate their grammar knowledge as they need to take care of other task requirements, thus ending up writing in disregard for accuracy and making numerous errors. Gone should be the practice of asking students to write eight set pieces with 300–500 words each. It should be the practice of asking them to write less each time, but more throughout a school term. Maybe getting students to be prolific can help them reduce the number of errors they make in writing.
4. **The use of a cumulative approach and curriculum overhaul:** As this action research project has shown, grammar and writing should go hand in hand, and selective correction can facilitate the incorporation of the teaching of grammar into the teaching of writing. I am also of the opinion that selective correction can achieve such incorporation in a cumulative manner. After all, there is more point to just asking students to focus only on one or two language items. In the long run, they will need to learn more, even though they may learn less each time so that they can find what they have to learn each time more manageable.

What does learning cumulatively mean? For example, teachers direct students to focus on language item A this time, and language item A and B next time, and A, B and C later. This was the approach that I originally hoped to follow, but my rather brief action research period did not allow enough time for that. Still, it is worth noting that one implication of selective correction and the cumulative approach would be the need to overhaul the existing curriculum which would involve designing a series of writing situations that would allow students to use the prescribed language items cumulatively. This may also imply that students become confident, power and prolific writers cumulatively!
5. **Tracking students' progress over time, not just one year:** If students do not become confident, power and prolific writers suddenly, then schools may need to rethink the time factor in the writing curriculum. At present, writing curricula in Hong Kong schools are structured on a yearly basis, meaning schools decide what students should learn over one school year only. But to make selective correction and the cumulative approach work, it would be necessary to consider the teaching and learning of writing as a continuous process, not a number of fragmented teaching and writing stages having little or nothing to do with one another.

If possible, it would be better to devise a curriculum which allows one teacher to stay with a group of students for more than one school year so that the teacher could implement selective correction in such a way that would make the cumulative approach possible. Alternatively, when a teacher hands over his/her group to another teacher at the turn of a school year, the two teachers could also share what has been done and what is to be done in writing. In short, there should be more continuity in the teaching and learning of writing so that selective correction can achieve its full potential.

Conclusion

I believe there should be a great role for selective correction in the writing classroom. My experience tells me that teachers should find it manageable, because they can do less as a result. Students should also find it manageable, because they will find it easier to focus on their language. I also believe that teachers should rethink the correction of students' work. Eliminating errors should not be the only goal. We should not get students to achieve full accuracy (which is, frankly, quite impossible) at the expense of other equally important areas, such as content and development of ideas. Selective correction may free up some time for teachers to help students with those important areas in writing.

References

- Ferris, D. (2005). *Treatment of Error in Second Language Student Writing*. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.
- Ferris, D and Roberts, B. (2001). Errors Feedback in L2 Writing Classes: How Explicit Does It Need to Be? *Journal of Second Language Writing*. (10). 161–184.
- Harmer, J. (2004). *How to Teach Writing*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
- Lee, I. (2004). Error Correction in L2 Secondary Writing Classrooms: The Case of Hong Kong. *Journal of Second Language Writing*. (13). 285–312.
- Thornbury, S. (2000). *How to Teach Grammar*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.

Reflection

When I started this action research project one year ago, I expected it to increase my understanding of the teaching of writing. Looking back, I think it has lived up to my expectation. What I did not expect a year ago was that this project would also change my understanding of what it meant to be a teacher. Teachers are figures of authority, and this is especially so in a Chinese community like Hong Kong, which is heavily influenced by the Confucian idea of the respectability of teachers in society. But being a source of authority does not exempt me from seeking improvement. Conducting action research has helped me realise that quality teaching requires me to examine and reflect on my teaching practice, instead of clinging to routines that may not benefit my students. If people in other professions do not live in a time warp, why should teachers have such a privilege?

I started this project a revolutionary, believing that it would give me an opportunity to change many things in one go, but I ended up being a realist, focusing on one very specific (and much watered-down) research focus. Did it disappoint me? No, because I soon realised that it is better to change one thing at a time so as to make things easier for everyone than uproot everything and make everyone suffer. I think this is what action research is about. This is also what life is about!

As I have pointed out in my report, this project will not stop my students from mistakes, but I hope they are now in a better position to take control of at least some aspects of the English Language. If another teacher enslaved by marking compositions happens to read this report, I hope he/she would agree with my conclusion that marking is not just about detecting grammatical errors. Other things, such as content, also matter.

My thanks go to Dr Kennard, principal of my school, St Paul's College, for his support throughout the whole process. I must also thank Mr Dennis Yuen, assistant vice principal, and Mr David Chan, head of English, for their ideas and advice. Di, Margot and Mr Brad Adams of the IBSC have done a great deal to make the process comfortable and enjoyable for us, especially those of us who undertook action research for the first time. I am grateful to them for their counsel.

The Use of Visual Stimuli Helps Boys to Become Prolific, Powerful and Confident Writers

SHERIDAN COVERDALE BRIGHTON GRAMMAR SCHOOL, MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

Abstract

Two separate groups of Year 1 boys were chosen to participate in an action research project during the writing block in English at Brighton Grammar School, a boys' independent Anglican school in Melbourne, Australia. The research question was: How can the use of visual stimuli help boys to become prolific, powerful and confident writers? Various writing tasks were completed. Some of the tasks focused on the boys writing in various genres using visual stimuli. As a comparison, some lessons did not include visual stimuli to support the writing process. The aim of the research project was to establish whether the use of visual stimuli in the writing process helped boys to write prolifically, powerfully and confidently. Although past research advocates visual stimuli as a powerful tool for helping boys' learn, it has not been outlined as a teaching strategy in past curriculum frameworks. The research shows that the boys' willingness, motivation, engagement and ability to write were significantly greater when visual stimuli were used. This suggests that it is a powerful tool for boys' writing.

Introduction

I have become increasingly aware that boys write well if they can couple this process with visual stimuli. Boys are very connected and engaged in a visual environment including electronic games, computer games, TV and multimedia. Boys learn best when their environment is multimodal. One cannot dismiss the conventions of print and the study of genre; integrating these with visual imagery consolidates understanding and empowers the writer to be more confident. Boys also enjoy creating their own artwork in the publishing of their work and take pride in showcasing this.

My interest in visual stimuli as a teaching practice evolved while teaching Year 6 in the mid 1990's. At the time students were completing a unit of work, entitled 'Author Studies'. While examining picture story books by Jeannie Baker and one book in particular, *Windows*, a wordless book of collages depicting change that happens over time by looking out of the same window, it was noted how much they enjoyed interpreting each page and writing about it by using the visual elements in the story. In pairs, students also re-created a page each to make a classroom display. Their

participation, engagement, motivation, appreciation of art, and writing at the time demonstrated the importance and power of using visual stimuli in literacy.

Over the past years concerns regarding boys' education have received much media attention. The research also indicated that boys' written stories were different from girls and that boys used characters and plot sequences based on action toys, films or TV programs (Alloway *et al.*, 2002, p. 49). Recollecting earlier successes working with visual literacy, I became increasingly aware that boys learn better cognitively if they are exposed to visual stimuli.

At the time, the Head of Brighton Grammar Junior School, Mr Peter Toms, was passionate about how boys could be better learners. His focus was integrating Thinking Skills into the curriculum, including the use of graphic organisers. This use of visual text improved boys' learning and thinking, and this inspired me to use more visual stimuli in the writing process to improve boys' achievement levels in writing.

With the opportunity through the IBSC to research the question, 'How can we help boys become prolific, powerful and confident writers?', and given that I was already using a lot of visual stimuli in the writing process, I decided to target my specific research on the question, 'How can the use of visual stimuli help boys to become prolific, powerful and confident writers? The definitions for 'prolific', 'powerful' and 'confident' in the context of this research question are:

Prolific: In this research the term will include being able to write more meaningfully and being able to explain or describe events or actions more fluently, more sequentially and in greater detail using purposeful text.

Powerful: In this research the term will mean that by using visual stimuli boys can continually refer to the stimuli available and cognitively integrate this to make greater meaning of their writing. This will include being able to use appropriate text, greater use of sight words, developing sentence structure, and demonstrating a fuller understanding of the genre and the purpose of the writing task.

Confident: In this research the term will mean the boys will be able to feel more confident by knowing what they have to write about, by having a sense of ownership, by being able to draw upon the visual stimuli to complete the task using a step-by-step process, and by always having something to refer back to as a point of checking, clarification, verification and confirmation.

In commencing my research I needed to establish whether I was going to use visual stimuli, visual text or visual literacy. I have decided to call it 'visual stimuli' as it includes anything visual for boys to draw on to assist them in the writing process, even memory which is a visual ability to show how they are thinking. It includes: visual text, modelled writing, headings, body language, graphic organisers, text for support in the spelling process, resources, flow charts, time-lines, webs, cross-sections, labels, tables, pictures, photos, images, IT resources, the interactive whiteboard, drawings, art work, graphic text, signs, diagrams, books, posters, big books, e-books, physical representation, surveys, charts, and most importantly, real life experience. The way the cognitive processes work to integrate visual stimuli in the writing process is not the focus of this study. Rather, the focus is to demonstrate that providing boys with visual stimuli can help boys to be prolific, powerful and confident writers.

Literature Review

The literature review looks at research material that shows that boys can improve in Literacy if they can be supported by visual stimuli, especially in the writing process

Much research has been undertaken in response to the low scores boys achieve in English tests and in particular, writing (Alloway *et al.*, 2002 and Younger *et al.*, 2005). Researchers have tried to identify strategies that “appear to have the potential to make a difference to boys’ learning, motivation and engagement with their schooling, and consequently to raise levels of academic achievement” (Younger *et al.*, 2005, p. 8).

One study, “*Classroom Approaches to Support Boys’ Writing*”, states that the triad (one research group) concentrated on moving from ‘learning to write’ (technical skills) to ‘becoming a writer’ (understanding the meaning and other dimensions of writing). It was noted that one of the approaches that assisted boys to become writers was the use of visual approaches to inspire writing. The boys’ focus groups showed that they were more assured with the language of writing and were able to talk about the requirements of different text types and about the decisions they needed to make when writing. One reason for this was that they could draw on visual memory (Younger *et al.*, 2005, p. 44). Results from *Raising Boys’ Achievement* (2005) also demonstrated that by the end of the project, boys were better writers with:

- wider use of vocabulary and increased fluency;
- increased quantity and quality of writing;
- greater use of imagery and more adventurous writing; and
- improved attitude, engagement, motivation, self-esteem, enthusiasm and commitment.

Moline (1995) emphasizes the importance of allowing students to use visual stimuli:

Literature is more than reading stories; literacy also includes reading and writing information. Similarly, Information Literacy is more than communicating with words, because many information texts also use important visual elements such as diagrams, graphs, maps and tables. To provide a complete literacy, therefore, we need to include opportunities to draw information as well as to write it. (p. 1)

He also clarifies that visual text is “highly complex and not an academically soft option.” He sees it as complementary to the writing process, since it provides ‘layers of information’ (p. 3). Drawings such as graphics, labels and other forms of visual text and visual information support writing, and should not be considered as an add-on, but rather, communicate meaning to summarise, highlight, support and explain what they are writing about. They can be a powerful tool to match text to purpose, and as Moline points out, “Visual literacy is a life skill” (p. 3).

Jenkin (2008) states that writing needs to be purposeful by including genre-based approaches across the curriculum where “visual images are used to stimulate writing” and that “teachers modelling writing help to support and develop the interests of the children through the deliberate use of visual texts and visual approaches with explicit links to writing”. She also describes visual literacy as including facial expressions, body language, drawing, painting, sculpture, hand signs, street signs, international symbols, layout of the pictures and words in a textbook, the clarity of type fonts, computer images, pupils producing still pictures, sequences, movies or video, user-

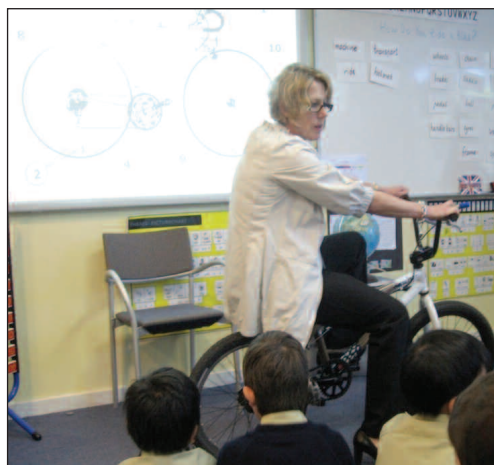
friendly equipment design and critical analysis of television advertisements. Jenkins argues that “there is no explicit curriculum to show students how to think critically about visual data”.

Alan Green’s ‘*Critically reading the picture: a visual language framework for studying picture books*’ in *Boys and Literacy – Teaching Units*, published in the Curriculum Resource book by Alloway *et al.* (1997), demonstrates and supports the need for a visual learning environment to enrich the literacy process, especially for boys, and describes how motivated boys become in reading when they are given opportunities to study the pictures in texts, by examining artistic elements of colour, shape, line and texture. It is through the explanation of pictures that boys gain meaning of the text and will write with more detail about size of an object, setting, colour, position, direction, angle, light, body language and clothing.

Peter Felten states that “images no longer exist primarily to entertain and illustrate, but rather, they are becoming central to communication and meaning-making” (2008, p. 60). Felten emphasises that “seeing is not simply a process of passive reception of stimuli but involves active construction of meaning” (p. 61). The use of visual stimuli includes visual literacy, “just as writing is to textual literacy, the capacity to manipulate and make meaning with images is a core component of visual literacy” (p. 61).

Background to the Project

Two cohorts of Year 1 boys (approximately six-years old) were part of this research project from July 2009–March 2010. Nineteen Year 1 boys were in the first series of lessons from July–November 2009. Seventeen boys from Year 1 were in the second cohort. These boys were part of the research project in the first Semester, 2010. All parents from both cohorts signed permission slips for their boys to be involved in the action research.



The Boys in Cohort 1: There were three lessons in the first cohort that formed part of the research. The two lessons were based on Explanation Text (*Targeting Text, Book 3*, 2003, p. 50). The first one was on the topic, ‘How do you ride a bike?’, and the second writing was on ‘Similarities and Differences between a Turtle and a Tortoise’. Both included visual stimuli.

The third lesson did not include visual stimuli. Instead, the boys had to rely on real life experience following a series of eight swimming lessons over four weeks. The boys wrote a procedural text, ‘How do you swim?’ (*Targeting Text, Book 2*, 2003, p. 50).

The Boys in Cohort 2: There were three lessons also delivered to the Cohort 2. The first lesson was a description using De Bono's *Six Thinking Hats: Yellow Hat*. The boys wrote about 'Good points about going to the beach' – relying on real-life experience. The second lesson was a recount (*Targeting Text, Book 2*, 2003, p. 4) which included a series of lessons based on the story, *Little Red Riding Hood*. The third and final series of lessons was based on writing a Description Text (*Targeting Text, Book 1*, 2003, p. 80) about 'Our School'. It included a before and after phase in this writing. The before phase did not include any visual stimuli. The after phase comprised a number of sessions that included visual stimuli — foot excursion, pictures, mural — and culminated with a presentation at Junior School Assembly.

The Research Approach

The action research is mostly qualitative. In conducting this action research I will examine the benefits of using visual stimuli in the writing process, and the results will indicate whether the inclusion of visual stimuli helps boys to be prolific, powerful and confident writers. It will examine where the boys improved in their writing. In using this methodology I will offer descriptions and explanations of the experience used in my teaching practice.

The Research Sample

The research was conducted at Brighton Grammar School, an independent boys' Anglican school in the Bayside suburb of Brighton in Melbourne, Australia. The student population in the Junior School is over 400 boys, from Early Learning Centre 3 to Year 6. The Middle Campus (Years 7 and 8) and the Senior Campus (Years 9–12) are situated across a busy road. In both cohorts there was a mixed academic ability ranging from consolidating writers to beginning writers. All boys in both Year levels were included in the research.

Data Collection

Two surveys were conducted with the boys in the first cohort, but no surveys were conducted with the boys in the second cohort. This was due to three reasons: it was the commencement of the school year, the boys were very much in the beginning or early phase in their ability to write, and there were only two months in which to focus the project with the second cohort.

Quantitative methodology was used when conducting the surveys. They were given before the research commenced to determine boys' opinions on how well they write. The second survey (Appendix 2) looked more specifically at whether the boys value the inclusion of visual stimuli in the writing process.

Qualitative data were collected in the form of:

- Draft samples and published samples of boys' writings;
- Drawings of boys' work that complement their writing;
- Photos of some of the lessons where visual stimuli is used; and
- Published copies of the boys' writing in all lessons. Samples of boys' work where visual stimuli was not included in the writing process.

1. SURVEYS

The first survey was created and used by my IBSC Action Research group, and the second survey, using visual stimuli in the writing process, is specific to this action research. These surveys were only carried out with the first cohort of boys.

The first Literacy Survey was collated using a percentage scale (Appendix 1).

The Writing Survey including the use of visual stimuli was collated using 3 faces (ð K Λ) for each question to establish the boys' thoughts about using visual stimuli in the writing process.

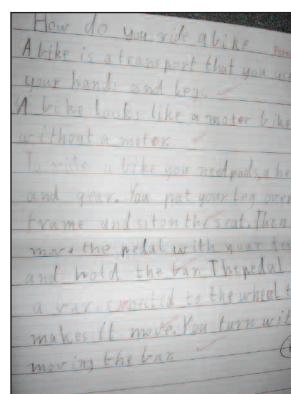
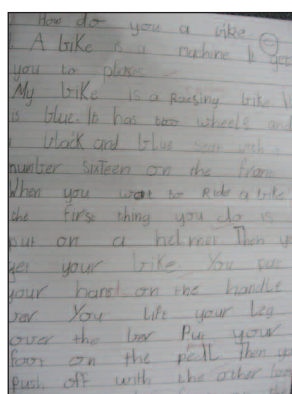
2. WRITING SAMPLES

Writing samples (drafts and published versions) were collected on all the lessons conducted in 2009 and 2010.

2009 Writing Samples

A. How do you ride a bike? The boys had to write an explanation about 'How do you ride a bike?' The visual stimuli included:

- A real bike with accessories
- Flashcards of bike parts
- Diagram labelling the parts of the bike
- Chart detailing the features of an explanation text
- Visual demonstration of how to ride a bike
- Pictures of various bikes
- Discussion about the process of how to ride a bike
- Modelled writing session
- Template to write a step-by-step explanation of how to ride a bike
- List of sentence starters to show sequencing



Most of the visual stimuli were included before the writing process and during the discussion phase of the lesson. The visual stimuli remained available throughout the lesson for boys to continually draw on to assist with their writing.

B. Similarities and Differences between a Turtle and a Tortoise

The boys had to write a project explaining the 'Similarities and Differences between Turtles

and Tortoises'. The visual stimuli included:

- Information books including images of turtles and tortoises
- PowerPoint presentations to show differences (Appendix 5)
- Diagrams
- Pictures, charts and headings prepared for their projects
- Modelled writing sessions to show how to write an explanation so boys could use writings as a reference during the writing process
- Template to write the draft (Appendix 3)
- Discussions about the differences and similarities by referring to the resources
- An excerpt from the documentary, *In Cold Blood*, narrated by David Attenborough
- Fact sheet from the internet used as part of a reading lesson
- Information books and picture story books
- Pictures, images and diagrams downloaded from the internet
- Large Big Books to show how to set out work



Again, most of the visual stimuli were included before the writing process, during the discussion phase, during the modelled writing phase, and throughout the time the boys needed to write their project.

C. How do you swim?

Limited visual stimuli were used in this lesson. The boys had to rely on visual memory, real life experience and limited visual text. This lesson followed a series of eight swimming lessons the boys participated in over a four-week period at the school. The boys wrote a procedural text, 'How do you swim?' Discussion centered around body position, submergence, body parts working together simultaneously and breathing. I wrote down some sentence starters and we discussed the step-by-step process.

E. Our School – Description Text

As an introduction to this lesson, the boys were asked to write a description about their school. There were discussions but limited visual stimuli for the boys to refer to.

Next, the boys went on a walk around the different campuses and attempted to complete a survey sheet. Pictures were taken and compiled to make a PowerPoint of the school.

In the next writing session, the boys viewed the PowerPoint presentation and we discussed the places visited and what they learnt from their walk. Following this lesson, the boys drew a picture of one area of the school they visited to make a class mural.

In the next lesson the boys wrote about their school. The boys used the survey sheet to support their writing. A modelled writing lesson demonstrated how to write the description. All boys had to begin with, 'I go to Brighton Grammar School.' Pictures of the school, the mural and key words were available to them during the writing sessions.

Following the writing session, the boys presented their project to the rest of the Junior School as an Assembly item (Appendix 6).



Results

1. Survey 1 – Initial Survey (Appendix 1)

Most boys feel they can write well and have a good self-image in regard to their ability to write. Boys feel strongly that writing is an important skill. Most boys do not feel that they need help with strategies although the majority like to write with images, and they like to write about their own experiences and choose their own topics. They do not want to listen to music, they do not want feedback, and they do not think they find editing a difficult task. The majority of boys enjoy using the computer in the writing process.

Analysis of Questions No 18, 19 & 20

The results show that some boys find writing boring if they have to consider correct writing conventions and correct spelling, or in test situations. The boys' reasons for this include:

- Having to spell words correctly and write conventionally take the creative flow out of writing and causes the process to be disjointed and fixed on other things than the audience or the purpose of the writing.
- Anxiety in test situations causes writing to be less enjoyable.

The results show that boys like to write if they can write about themselves, if their work is going to be published, and if they can write different genres such as poetry and story books.

2. Survey 2 – Student Reflection Survey, Writing using by Visual Stimuli (Appendix 2)

The survey results show 15 out of the 19 boys surveyed in the first cohort prefer big books, pictures and images to help them know what to write about (Q.1, Q.7 and Q.8). Most of the boys surveyed do not think the interactive whiteboard helps them to be more confident writers (Q.2), but most of the boys surveyed either prefer or don't mind watching videos to help them write more confidently when writing about a specific topic (Q. 3). Most of the boys prefer their work to be displayed around the classroom (Q.4) and over half of the boys feel they can learn about things without looking at pictures, books and videos (Q.5).

Analysis

The results show that the majority of boys surveyed prefer to be supported in the writing process using visual stimuli by using such resources as picture books, big books, videos and pictures and by engaging in creative visual learning to accompany their writing. Most boys also like to have their work displayed. Only a small percentage did not feel they required the use of visual stimuli to help them in the writing process.

Surveys like this can be easily misinterpreted by such young boys; however, explanations were provided where possible so all boys had the opportunity to understand each question.

Findings

COHORT 1 – 2009

In the first lesson, most of the boys wrote a full A3 page explanation on how to ride a bike that included correct sequencing, correct terminology and spelling, and appropriate basic sentence structuring. This was because the boys had sentence starters to work with that were on display and also there had been much discussion about how to ride a bike. They wrote confidently drawing upon the various visual text and stimuli to assist them. Only a few boys lacked some information or sequencing in their text. All boys completed this exercise.

In the second lesson, 'Similarities and differences between a turtle and a tortoise', all boys enthusiastically engaged in this writing project. They utilised all the visual stimuli to assist in their writing and found the initial draft template most helpful to collect their information and then transpose it into their explanation. The boys wrote prolifically, they wrote confidently, and their writing was powerfully rich in contextual understanding and information. They really enjoyed including pictures, diagrams and headings to publish their work.

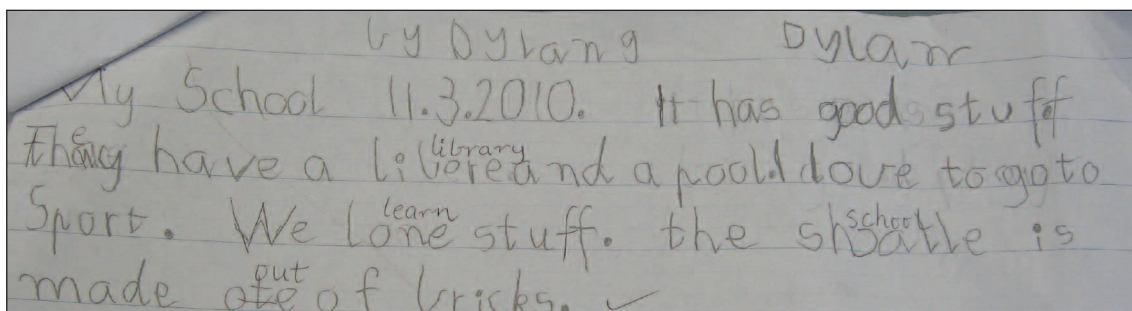
In the third lesson, 'How do you swim?', boys did not write as much as compared to the first two lessons. Limited visual stimuli were included in this lesson. The information the boys wrote was contextually good; however, there was a lack of detail in most of the writing. The boys all worked well on this lesson. They all started writing enthusiastically. Most boys understood the process; however, there was not as much writing done as there was in the lesson, 'Similarities and differences between a turtle and a tortoise' or the lesson, 'How do you ride a bike?' The boys did not use as many descriptive words. The sentences were short and most boys completed approximately a half page of writing. Only a small number of boys completed a page of writing. All boys were able to describe a step-by-step process about how you swim.

COHORT 2 – 2010

Limited visual stimuli were used in this lesson about 'Good points about going to the beach'. This lesson also demonstrated that while using visual stimuli is an important motivator for boys to write, the stimuli need to be introduced as soon as possible to help the boys better understand their topic, to give them greater confidence in their writing such as use of vocabulary, and to help them explore pictures to reinforce what it is you do at the beach. In this lesson the visual stimuli did not make them more prolific, powerful or confident writers. It did, however clarify and explain their writing, and also stimulated them to complete the writing task, so they could also complete the artistic part of the lesson. Although they enjoyed the writing experience, sentences were basic, simple and lacking in detail.

In the lesson about *Little Red Riding Hood*, boys were enthralled by the pictorial study of the book, and this was a powerful way for boys to understand the story and to create themselves as the character to write about. Again, the pictorial template of the story helped the boys to write the sequence of events more confidently.

The last lesson, 'Our School', profoundly showed the impact of the use of visual stimuli. The boys were only able to write a few sentences about their school without using visual stimuli; however, the published versions were markedly different and demonstrated that boys can write prolifically, powerfully and confidently by utilising visual stimuli at all stages of the writing process.



Before stimuli

When using visual stimuli the boys wrote more prolifically. They were able to include more detail with more complex sentence structures using appropriate descriptive vocabulary. The boys were able to write more powerfully as they could refer to the visual stimuli as a reference to their writing. The boys always enjoyed looking at the graphics or visual cues to help in the various stages of their writing, or to motivate them to finish their writing to move onto their art work. The only time the visual stimuli was not as effective in the writing process was when the boys used it at the end of the lesson, although it was a motivating factor to finish their work. They were confident because they had all the information available and understood the requirements of the writing task.

My School

I go to Brighton Grammar School. Mr. Tellefson's office is big. It has lots of books. The sick bay is little. It has two beds. The front foyer is where Susie works. The reception area is big. It has art. It is big! The Lower Primary has some toilets. It has six class rooms. There's lots of boys in the 3 - 6 area and that is where our buddies are. We have two play grounds and a sand pit. The GBR Hall is close to the playground and that is where we do Holiday Program and Out of School Care. In the ELC there are two classrooms and a big playground. The Library has 100's of books and shelves and my favourite type of books are dinosaur books.

The Wilson House Oval has a running track, it is close to the GBR Hall. In the middle of the tennis courts are some nets and I do tennis lessons, it is close to Wilson House Oval. The Gymnasium has two basketball nets, it has lots of lines. The Uniform Shop has clothes. The Canteen is where we get our food. We have lots of good art in the Art Room. At the Music Room there are 12 pianos. There are loads of computers. The Crowther Oval has football goals. The Senior School looks big and Rosstrevor has lots of big boys that go there. We saw some old uniforms when we went to the Development Office

By Dylan

Writing sample after visual stimuli

Implications for Teaching Practice

The aim of this research is to make classroom teachers aware that boys can be prolific, powerful and confident writers when supported by visual stimuli. In classrooms today there still tends to be a lack of visual stimuli used to support boys' writing other than charts and diagrams, especially in upper primary and secondary schools. If boys in the Lower Primary years can be prolific, powerful and confident writers using visual stimuli, then teachers should continue this practice throughout their schooling; it should be incorporated into the Curriculum P-12, especially in boys' schools.

If teachers are serious about improving writing in boys, we need to establish those strategies that can assist them in this process. Williams (2007), in her article *'Reading the painting: Exploring visual literacy in the primary years,'* states that "the concept of visual literacy is still very limited in classroom practice" despite the shift from visual text to the visual in our everyday lives. She clarifies this from the research by Smolin & Lawless (2003), which shows "there is little evidence of it in primary-aged children" while studies by Hagood, Stevens, & Reinking (2002) and studies by Lankshear & Knobel (2002), show there is an increasing interest in visual literacy in middle and

upper high school students. In supporting the need for schools to incorporate visual literacy in teaching practice, Williams (2007) argues, “by offering important information beyond what is available in the printed text visual representations can play an important role in cognitive processing, and it may supplement or even replace the written word” (p. 637).

The research shows that boys can be prolific, powerful and confident writers if they can use visual stimuli in the writing process. Since boys respond well as visual learners, teachers must be prepared to provide opportunities for them to write using appropriate visual stimuli during their writing. Boys need to feel connected to the writing and they need to work in a visual way to extract and utilise the information from the various sources to help make their writing meaningful, purposeful and powerful. Publishing their writing (also a visual element) and providing opportunities for boys to include artwork to demonstrate their understanding visually, are significant motivators for boys to write more prolifically. Boys will take greater pride in their work, their output will be significantly greater, and their connection to the writing process more powerful, especially if they are guided and supported through the process using visual stimuli.

Conclusion

The research conducted with both cohorts shows that boys are better writers if they can use visual stimuli in the process to support their writing. Their writing is more prolific, there is more output and the boys are showing an awareness of the expectations by writing contextually and sequentially. Their writing is more powerful because the boys can demonstrate they have a greater understanding of the topic and the purpose of the writing task. The boys are more confident because they can draw on a number of stimuli to connect to the writing process and demonstrate their understanding using both visual stimuli and representing it visually.

References

- Alloway N. and Gilbert P. eds., (1997). *Boys and Literacy – Teaching Units*. Australia: Curriculum Corporation.
- Alloway N. Freebody, P. Gilbert P. and Muspratt S. (2002). *Boys, Literacy and Schooling, Expanding the Repertoires of Practice*. Australia: J.S. McMillan Printing Group.
- Blake Education, *Targeting Text, Book 1, Narrative, Poetry, Description, Response, Lower Primary*, Reprinted 2003. NSW: Blake Education.
- Blake Education, *Targeting Text, Book 2, Recount, Procedure, Exposition, Lower Primary*, Reprinted 2003. NSW: Blake Education.
- Blake Education, *Targeting Text, Book 3, Information Report, Explanation, Discussion, Lower Primary*, Reprinted 2003. NSW: Blake Education.
- Croser N. 2003. *Little Red Riding Hood*, South Australia: Era Publications.
- De Bono E. (1992). *Six Thinking Hats*. Melbourne: Hawker Brownlow Education.
- McNiff, J. Lomax, P. and Whitehead, J. 2003. *You and Your Action Research Project*, Second Edition. New York: Routledge Falmer.
- Felton P. (Nov/Dec, 2008). *Resource Review: Visual Literacy*. www.changemag.org
- Jenkin R. (2008). *Visual Literacy*. Retrieved from www.teachingexpertise.com/articles/visual-literacy-3961
- Moline, S. (1995). *I See What You Mean. Children at Work with Visual Information*. Australia: Longman.
- Moss, G. (2007). *Literacy and Gender, Researching Texts, Contexts and Readers*. USA: Routledge.
- Ofsted (2003). *Schools Where Boys Write Well*. UK: Ofsted Publications Centre.
- Rowan, L., Knobel, M. Bigum, C. and Lankshear, C. (2002). *Boys, Literacies and Schooling*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Skelton C., Francis, B., and Smulyan, L., Eds. (2006). *The SAGE Handbook of Gender and Education*. London: Sage Publications.
- Williams T. L. (2007). *The Reading Teacher Vol. 60, No.7*, pp. 636–642. International Reading Association, USA. Retrieved from www.reading.org/General/Publications/Journals
- Younger M., Warrington M., Gray J., Rudduck, J., McLellan, R., Bearne, E., Kershner, R., and Bricheno P. (2005) *Raising Boys' Achievement*. UK: Queen's Printer and Controller of HMSO Printing Group, University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.

Appendix 1 – Initial Survey

WRITING SURVEY

Name _____

Please answer the following questions by selecting the percentage that you agree with the statement. 100% would mean that you fully agree while 0% would mean that you don't agree with the statement at all.

Me as a writer

1. I can write well.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
2. I wish I could write better.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
3. I feel I am a good writer in relation to the other boys in my class.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
4. I feel that writing is an important skill.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
5. I enjoy writing in my free time.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
6. I enjoy writing for school.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
7. I would like help with strategies that improve my writing.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

My writing interests

8. I prefer writing about images that I see.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
9. I prefer writing about experiences that I have had myself.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
10. I prefer writing about things I have read about and am interested in.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
11. I prefer to choose my own topics when writing.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
12. I prefer to choose my own genre (poetry, narrative, factual) when writing.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
13. I prefer to write while listening to music.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

Different parts of my writing

14. When I write, I like to have feedback from my teacher.

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

15. When I write I find it difficult to edit and make changes /corrections.

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

16. I find it easier to write when I use the computer rather than writing by hand.

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

17. I like to share my work with an audience.

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

18. Which parts of writing, if any, do you find boring?

19. Which parts of writing, if any, do you enjoy?

20. Describe a memorable writing experience that you have had.

Results of Survey

Name	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12	Q13	Q14	Q15	Q16
CA	100	0	100	100	50	70	10	100	90	100	100	30	10	50	0	50
ZA	100	100	100	90	100	80	80	70	100	90	50	100	100	100	50	60
JA	100	100	100	70	20	90	0	50	0	100	100	90	0	0	90	100
EB	90	0	90	100	10	100	40	0	80	60	50	100	0	10	0	0
BC	100	0	100	100	0	50	0	100	100	100	100	30	10	50	0	100
VH	80	100	100	100	50	100	0	70	100	100	90	100	0	0	0	100
PC	0	100	0	100	0	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	50	0	0	0
DG	100	100	90	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	50	100	0	100	100	100
WH	100	10	50	100	0	100	0	100	50	70	0	100	0	50	0	100
DK																
HP	50	60	40	100	80	80	50	40	80	70	100	60	0	40	70	50
JR	100	100	100	100	100	90	30	30	100	90	100	100	100	100	70	50
MR	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
TS	70	80	90	100	80	50	50	100	100	100	100	90	90	90	80	100
MT	100	100	100	100	100	50	30	60	70	90	90	70	0	10	80	90
BW	100	0	70	90	0	80	50	100	60	50	100	50	0	100	0	100
JX	90	100	70	80	100	50	90	100	100	100	100	0	60	60	0	100
AY	100	0	100	100	0	100	30	100	100	100	100	100	100	0	100	100
SY	100	100	100	100	100	90	0	100	100	50	100	90	0	100	0	100

QUESTIONS NO 18, 19 & 20

Comments by students	No 18 – Which parts of writing, if any, do you find boring?	No 19 – Which parts of writing, if any, do you enjoy?	No 20 – Describe a memorable writing experience that you have had
Cameron	When I think too much.	I enjoy having free-time writing.	I enjoy writing about our school.
Zachary	I find it boring in doing tests	I enjoy doing diary writing	I enjoyed writing, 'The Owl and the Pussycat'
Jaikob	Not getting the spelling right. Reports, recounts, procedures.	I enjoy finishing my work.	Tests.
Evan	I find poetry boring.	Diary writing.	I liked writing about our school.
Ben	When I think about stuff.	I enjoy writing about diary writing.	I enjoyed writing about our school.
Vansh	Doing long work like poems.	Writing journal. It's good for you.	Frog report. Because I like it.
Peter	I hate writing tests.	I enjoy writing about my weekend.	Writing Journal.
Declan	I think play on the computers.	I like writing books.	About the weekend on Mondays.
Wei-Yee	I find projects boring.	I enjoy diary writing.	I enjoyed writing about my school.
Dominic			
Hristos	My diary.	Poems.	Being a good boy.
Jeremy	I hate writing tests.	I enjoy writing at school.	I enjoy writing about my family.
Matthew	I hate thinking.	I enjoy making books. I enjoy reading. I enjoy pictures and writing about them.	I enjoy writing stories.
Tommy	Getting words incorrect and doing it again.	Writing the fun parts.	Writing about frogs on the computer.
Max	Writing is boring because the words are boring.	I like typing on the computer.	I enjoy writing at school.
Björn	Not getting the correct words in good sentences.	Writing books and poems.	I enjoy writing about a boy and writing about me at school.
Jerry	I don't like it because I have to do a lot of writing and hard work.	I like writing because I like pictures in the books.	I enjoy writing things, like about dinosaurs.
Alexander	I find homework boring.	I enjoy writing little books.	I enjoy doing little books.
Suguru	I hate writing tests.	I enjoy my weekend journal writing.	I enjoyed writing about weekends.

Appendix 2

WRITING SURVEY

Student Reflection Survey



Writing using by Visual Stimuli

		Ø	K	Λ
1	Pictures, Big Books and images help me to know what to write about.	12	3	1
2	Using the IWB helps me to write more confidently.	6	9	1
3	Watching videos or Clickview about a topic helps me to write more confidently.	7	7	2
4	I like to see my writing displayed around the classroom.	13	0	3
5	I can learn about things without looking at pictures, books or videos.	11	3	2
6	I like to draw or paint pictures about what I have learnt to write about.	10	4	2
7	I can write more when I can use pictures to help me.	10	5	1
8	I write more when I can draw pictures or do artwork to go with my writing.	7	6	3
9	Pictures from books help me to imagine what I am writing about and make writing easier for me.	12	2	2
10	I do not like to look at anything when I am writing.	6	4	6

Results 16/19 boys

Appendix 3

WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A TURTLE AND A TORTOISE?

	Tortoise	Turtle
		
What type of animal is it?		
Where does it live?		
Is it cold blooded?		
Are they related?		
What does it eat?		
What does it look like?		
Shape of it shell?		
Markings on its body		
Size		

Appendix 4

OUR SCHOOL

Our School	White Hat Fact Write one fact about each area that you see.	Description Write a describing word for each area.
1. Mr Tellefson's office		
2. Sick bay		
3. Front foyer		
4. Reception area		
5. Lower Primary area		
6. Years 3 – 6 area		
7. Playground		
8. GBR Hall		
9. ELC Centre		
10. Library		
11. Wilson House Oval		
12. Tennis courts		
13. Car park		
14. Gymnasium		
15. Uniform shop		
16. Canteen		
17. Cricket nets		
18. Art room		
19. Music room		
20. Computer Room		
21. Crowther Oval		
22. Senior School Clock tower		
23. Rosstrevor – Middle School		
24. Development Office		

Appendix 5

Hyperlink to the PowerPoint presentation, 'Turtles and Tortoises, Similarities and Differences' for Lesson 2, Similarities and Differences between Turtles and tortoises, 2009.

\\huey\coverdales\$\2005 - 2010 Brighton Grammar Files\Action Research\Lessons\Turtles and Tortoises\Turtles and tortoises.ppt

Hyperlink to the PowerPoint Assembly presentation for Lesson 3, Our School, 2010.

\\huey\coverdales\$\2005 - 2010 Brighton Grammar Files\Action Research\Our School\Powerpoint presentation for assembly 2010 1B Our School.ppt

Reflection

The research has been an arduous but rewarding experience. It has given me the opportunity to work with a cohort of boys to reflect on my own beliefs about boys' ability to write well by using visual stimuli, and then reflect on this in an academic process.

I hope this research will support teachers in their understanding of using visual text, art and other forms of visual stimuli as being fundamental to boys' writing in a prolific and powerful way. It empowers them and helps them to embrace the writing process more confidently.

Journaling Boys

SHERRY CREASMAN PRESBYTERIAN DAY SCHOOL, MEMPHIS, USA

Abstract

A daily journaling program was incorporated into the curriculum of my third-grade self-contained classroom at Presbyterian Day School to determine if this could assist the boys' development in becoming more powerful, confident, and prolific writers. The boys were given a choice of two topics each day over a four-month time period on which they wrote for approximately ten minutes. The journal entries were collected and read by me every two weeks. At that time I wrote comments on entries from each boy and made notations for the study on the length of entries of each participant. The findings indicated that daily journaling did help the boys become more powerful, confident, and prolific writers.

Research Question

How can a daily journaling program help third-grade boys become powerful, confident, and prolific writers?

Introduction

The third-grade boys in my classroom participated in a daily journaling exercise for a ten-minute period. I chose to incorporate this research topic into my curriculum based on research findings on the reluctance of boys' desire to write and the lack of confidence they have in their writing. It was my hope that by giving boys this opportunity to write freely on a topic without stating specific parameters of sentence structure, grammar and length and to share their writing with their peers, along with my comments on their entries, they would become more confident, powerful, and prolific in their writing as the project and year progressed.

Literature Review

The first literature sources consulted for this project were used to investigate the negative feelings boys may have about writing, which would lead them to not having confidence in their writing. Results from a 2007 writing survey of Grade 5 students, both boys and girls, in the Hamilton-Wentworth School District in Ontario indicated that "only fifty-five percent of the boys said they liked writing in school" (Spence, 2008, p. 19). This study also revealed "boys were more likely to feel overwhelmed and to have trouble thinking of what to write" (Spence, 2008, p. 19). Bruce Morgan,

author of *Writing Through the Tween Years: Supporting Writers, Grades 3–6*, wrote, “As a rule, the boys do not like writing as much as girls. Even with all the things I do to entice boys to write and bring their interests into the classroom, they still would avoid writing if they had the choice” (quoted in Fletcher, 2006, p. 5).

To be able to conduct a successful action research plan, it was necessary to structure a daily journaling program with certain activities that would ensure the highest level of success possible for each writer. An examination of the literature indicated certain activities that would be easy to use and lead to success:

- **giving the boys a choice of topics:** Ralph Fletcher, author of *Boy Writers – Reclaiming Their Voices*, asked approximately five hundred boys to “complete this sentence: ‘When we write in school I wish we were allowed to...’”. The overwhelming response to this question was a plea for more choice” (2006, p. 45).
- **having the boys read to an audience on a regular basis:** Ralph Fletcher believes teachers should “make sure the boys have real and varied audiences for their writing. Sharing and celebrating should not be a rare occurrence but a regular even in the classroom” (p. 37).
- **giving specific praise on the writer’s strengths:** Fletcher says, “ give specific praise. Find a place to ‘plug in’ to the boy’s topic or his writing. Build on strengths. When you point out a strong element in a boy’s writing, you’re showing him that you’re paying attention” (p. 97).

Context of the Research

The research was conducted in a self-contained third-grade classroom at Presbyterian Day School (PDS) in Memphis, Tennessee. PDS is an independent Christian boys’ school serving a population of approximately 630 boys in pre-kindergarten through 6th grade with four sections of each grade.

Research Methodology

Action research was the choice method for this project because it can be “seen as a form of self-study” (McNiff, Lomax, Whitehead, 2003, p. 9) in which an educator chooses a topic applicable to his teaching. The “relevance is guaranteed because the focus of each research project is determined by the researchers, who are also the primary consumers of the findings” (Sagor, 2000, p. 3). Using an action research approach also helps “educators be more effective at what they care most about – their teaching and development of their students” (Sagor, 2000, p. 3). One of the greatest joys teachers can experience is to see their students grow, which then makes the countless hours and tireless efforts spent in preparation and teaching so worthwhile.

Data Collection

The participants in this project were seventeen third-grade boys, eight to nine years of age, in a self-contained classroom. A varied range of academic abilities and levels of enthusiasm for writing existed among the students.

First, a survey was administered to assess each boy’s attitude toward his writing skill and interests. The second step in this project was to assess the boys’ background knowledge of journaling by simply asking each student to compose their definition of journaling. Next, a more detailed survey was

administered to establish their previous journaling experiences and their current thoughts on what journaling would be like in school, and to compile a list of writing topics that would interest them.

The journaling program was conducted each day by first introducing the two topic choices for the day. The boys chose their favorite topic and were given a ten-minute time allotment to express their thoughts.

At the end of four two-week time periods the boys' journals were collected. I read through the entries, taking notes on each student's choice of topics, length of writing samples, and details included in the entries. I also wrote personal comments and/or questions on some of the entries of each boy. Sharing journal entries with either the whole class or in a small group was also an integral part of the end of each two-week time period.

A post-survey was given to the seventeen participants at the conclusion of the project as a reflection outlet for the boys over the entire journaling experience. They were asked to evaluate their progress in their writing, list specifics they learned through writing each day, identify specific topics they definitely enjoyed, comment on which journaling activities they enjoyed and/or disliked, and discuss which journaling activities encouraged them to write entries with a greater length.

The journal entries were analyzed at the end of each two-week period by noting the length of the entries through a word count for each entry. I also noted the type of entries in which each boy wrote at the greatest length.

Research Results

The first survey assessing the general writing knowledge and attitude of each participant revealed that only five out of the seventeen boys felt they could write well, but seventeen had a desire to improve their writing. All seventeen boys felt that writing is an important skill, but only three out of seventeen enjoyed writing in their free time and enjoyed writing for school. All of the participants liked to have feedback from their teacher on their writing and found it difficult to edit and make corrections on their work. Surprisingly, only six of the participants liked to share their work with an audience. All of the boys had a preference to write about experiences they have had themselves and about things they have read about and were interested in, and to choose their own topics when writing.

A key finding was that twelve out of my seventeen students had a good grasp on the meaning of journaling. Definitions were as simple as *"Journaling is when you write down stuff that happens to you"* to ones as specific as *"Journaling is about writing things that you have done in your life so when you get old you can read it and remember things you have done in the past."*

As indicated by the following results from the first survey, the boys' previous journaling experiences and current thoughts on journaling provided an insight into the boys' attitudes to writing. Only two out of seventeen boys wrote in a personal journal at home, with thirteen stating the reason for not writing in a journal at home was that they never thought about it and the remaining two stating that writing didn't interest them. Fourteen participants thought writing in a journal at school would be just OK, two felt it would be a fun activity, and one student thought it would be boring. When asked if writing in a journal would help you learn something new about your writing, fourteen responded with a "yes" and three responded with a "no". Two boys thought they

might improve their errors in capitalization and punctuation through journal writing, four responded with using complete sentences, four thought they might see an improvement in their spelling, and seven thought they might see their handwriting improve.

My observations as the boys wrote indicated:

- In the first two-week session, boys struggled with “writer’s block,” during which time they only wrote a few sentences for a topic. However, as the project progressed the “writer’s block” struggles became either non-existent or became less frequent.
- In the first two-week session, each boy completed his writing a few minutes before the ten-minute time period elapsed, but as the project progressed, each boy could have used more than ten minutes for most of the daily topics in each two-week period.
- For the entire length of the research, each boy was enthusiastic about one of the topic choices.
- For the full length of the program each boy had days when the choice of topics was difficult because he liked both choices.
- For the complete span of the research no boy had a day for which the choice of topics was difficult because he did not like either choice.

Reading the individual journal entries also indicated:

- For topics asking for personal experiences, each boy wrote his longest entries.
- The boys who are strong in creativity tended to write the longer entries for the topics that asked for a creative answer.
- The length of the writing of all of the students increased by the end of the project.
- As the project progressed, the entries also included more details, showing more powerful writing. This seemed to take place mostly after I wrote comments, especially after I asked questions about something they wrote.

The post-survey administered to the boys concerning journaling was very encouraging in that the majority felt they had made improvements in their writing and now enjoyed journal writing, and felt that all of the activities helped them gain confidence in their writing. Before the journaling program only two boys felt journaling would be fun, but the post-survey resulted in fifteen boys stating the daily journaling was fun, two felt it was just OK, and no participant felt it was a boring activity. This showed a significant increase in the boys’ feeling toward journaling now being a fun activity.

A slight increase was revealed in the boys believing that they saw an improvement in their writing skills. The program began with fourteen boys believing an improvement was possible, and the program ended with sixteen of the seventeen believing they saw an improvement.

Sixteen of the seventeen boys enjoyed having a choice of topics each day. Sample responses include:

"I could choose the topic that interested me, so I could write about my experiences and not have to think really hard. Writing was easy."

"I liked picking the topic because we weren't told what to do."

"Having two journal topics each day was cool. There was always one that I wanted to write about."

"I enjoyed having a choice each day because some were silly and some were serious. Some days I was serious so I picked the serious one. Some days I was feeling silly so I picked the silly one."

The boys were asked to tell which journaling activity encouraged them to write longer entries that included more details and increased their confidence for writing. Two responded that only the teacher comments mattered, one boy felt it was sharing his thoughts with peers, one stated only having a choice of topics, and thirteen responded with all of these activities.

"I really liked getting my journal back and reading Mrs. C's comments. She would find something really funny to say about something that I wrote."

"It was like Christmas getting my journal back because Mrs. C always left me a special present about something that I wrote."

"Having Mrs. C write in my journal told me that I could write and she liked to read what I wrote."

"Seeing what Mrs. C wrote let me know that she really was interested in what I did over the weekend."

"It was a blast sharing my thoughts with my friends. We learned from each other. I learned new exciting words to use in my writing."

Conclusion

My findings in this study indicated that the daily journaling program implemented for the third-grade boys did help them become more confident, powerful, and prolific writers. Throughout the course of the project, each boy was writing longer entries with more details for most of the topics. They asked for the length of time for daily journaling to be increased so they could complete the writing all of their thoughts for each topic. Many of the boys would return to their journal to complete an entry at various times during the day.

The findings also indicated that the design of the journaling program played an integral part in assisting the boys in gaining confidence in their writing and in increasing the length of their journal entries. Having a choice of topics each day allowed for each student to write on a topic for which they felt most comfortable. Receiving encouraging comments and smiles from their peers as they read their choice of entries aloud also increased their confidence in their writing. Reading the remarks written by their teacher revealed to them that there was something good about their writing, which also aided in lifting their confidence in writing.

As a result of my findings in this research project, I will continue to incorporate this journaling program in my curriculum each year with all of the design elements – setting no grammar parameters, giving a choice of topics, writing teacher comments on entries, and having the boys read aloud to an audience.

Future research could be conducted in accordance with the effects of daily journaling on the writing in other subject assignments. Do the confidence level of the students and the increased length of journal entries carry over to their informative paragraphs, essays, and/or stories? Another area that could be researched with journaling is in the area of grammar and sentence structure. Does placing specific grammar and sentence structure parameters inhibit the quality and length of journal writing?

References

- Ferrance, E. (2000). Themes in Education – Action Research. *Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University*.
- Fletcher, R. (2000). *How Writers Work*. New York: HarpersCollins Publishers.
- Fletcher, R. (2006). *Boy Writers Reclaiming Their Voices*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Martha Currie Elementary School. (2006, January/February). Improving the Writing Performance of Boys. Leadership Academy – *Action Research Report*.
- McNiff, J., Lomax, P., and Whitehead, J. (2003). *You and Your Action Research Project*. New York: Routledge Falmer.
- Morgan, B. (2005). *Writing Through the Tween Years*. Portland: Stenhouse Publishers.
- O’Brien, A. and Neal, I. (March, 2007). Boys’ Writing: A ‘Hot Topic’ ... but what are the strategies? *Education Today*.
- Sagor, R. (2000). *Guiding School Improvement with Action Research*. ASCD.
- Spence, C. (2008). *The Joys of Teaching Boys*. Markham, Ontario: Pembroke Publishers.

Reflection

My action research journey can best be compared to a ride on a thrilling roller coaster with its many twists and turns. As you first enter the ride, find your seat, and you are on the way up the very first steep hill of this roller coaster, you are filled with excitement and anticipation. That is exactly how I felt from the time it was suggested that I apply for this experience to the time I arrived in New Zealand and met everyone on our team. I was so excited to be on this journey that would be one to stretch my professional career and abilities, allow me the opportunity to work with colleagues from around the world, and give me an opportunity to try a new program with my students. The anticipation of what I would learn was overwhelming.

Fear, apprehension, and motion sickness seem to be the emotions you feel on a roller coaster as you begin the descent of the first steep hill. These are feelings that I felt after the first day of introduction to the actual process I was about to embark on. I was filled with so much fear, apprehension, and inadequacy that I was literally sick that first night. I did not know how I was going to manage doing this type of research. Many others of the team had completed research very similar to this before and this was going to be my very first experience with action research, so feelings of being inadequate set in.

Just as a roller coaster continues with many twists and turns throughout the whole track filling you with exhilaration or alarm, my journey also continued with twists and turns. There were days filled with exhilaration from the interesting and helpful findings in the research articles and books I read, from the great entries and special responses from my students, and from the extremely helpful guidance from Margot and Di. But there were also times filled with nervousness from the days that I was not seeing the growth in my boys' writing I had hoped for to the days that balancing my teaching duties with the responsibilities of the action research seemed impossible to the days of my own writer's block as I was writing the drafts of and the final report.

But, as we all know, when the roller coaster ride ends feelings of relief, joy (for most people), and a sense of accomplishment overcome your heart. So it is with myself and the action research. Relief because I completed it; joy and a sense of accomplishment because I learned a lot about myself, have a new program to include in my teaching repertoire each year, made new life friends, the research project assisted seventeen young boys in becoming more confident, powerful, and prolific writers, and demonstrated to these young boys that writing can be a fun activity.

So, to anyone who is contemplating this journey, do it! It is a very valuable experience on all levels. You will grow professionally and personally. You will learn valuable educational principles and personal lessons.

My heartfelt thanks goes to Margot Long and Di Laycock for their constant support, guidance, patience, sharing of their expertise, encouragement, and love they showed to our team through this entire project. It is because of their help that I was able to complete this project with professional results.

Make My Day ... Read What I've Written!

SIMON CURTIS THE RIDGE SCHOOL, JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA

Abstract

A modified writing programme was introduced for a single school term (September–December 2009) for Grade 7 boys (ages 12–13 yrs) at The Ridge School in Johannesburg, South Africa. The aim was to assess whether structuring boys' writing for an authentic purpose and a real audience made them more prolific, powerful and confident writers. The process therefore was to guide boys through several purposeful writing activities with the understanding that they would be sharing their final products with peers, parents and a wider audience, from whom feedback could be elicited. Individual articles would be combined into a "brag portfolio" for each boy as the concrete product of their work.

Results gathered after the writing programme indicated that boys were more inspired to work to a better standard and to make their work more representative of what they could offer if they applied themselves diligently. The results also suggested that through the process of writing and feedback, boys learned that writing could be more enjoyable and were thus inclined to be more prolific writers. They also learned through responses to their writing activities that their writing could serve a real purpose. The boys realised that they could have an impact on people and could engender positive reactions to their writing, which helped them grow in confidence.

Introduction

RESEARCH QUESTION

The research question for this action research team was *"How can we help boys become prolific, powerful and confident writers?"*

Within my framework and context, I understood *prolific* to mean to produce more attempts at writing, to write more in each task or to have a willing attitude to offer more in their writing tasks, both at school and in their own time. I understood *powerful* to resonate with technical accuracy, originality, register and bringing more of self to each writing task. A *confident* writer is one who feels empowered to write what he believes in within the parameters of the task rather than stick to a given structure and methodological regurgitation. This also applies to an eager attitude to write within a social structure of peers, parents and teachers.

With this in mind, the final individual research question for my project was: *“How can a writing programme designed to get boys writing purposely for an audience make boys more prolific, powerful and confident writers?”*

My decision to use writing for a real purpose and an authentic audience as my action was based on prior readings, professional experience and a personal feeling that boys were not putting their soul into their writing. While several boys could write well, they lacked the motivation to use their talent and what they had learned. It was my belief that boys just did not have much inclination to write at school because it seemed, in the main, an exercise to please teachers and achieve good marks, but otherwise purposeless. I also felt that some boys who wrote well were concerned that they would be marginalised for going beyond the average in terms of creative writing by their peers. This seemed like an ideal opportunity to develop a purpose-driven and audience-driven writing programme that would prove more effective in getting boys to write more, to become more confident and, in essence, more powerful in their writing.

Literature Review

Below are listed the most pertinent and interesting statements and points for discussion regarding boys and writing, particularly at the level of the sample group.

Younger and Warrington (2003, p. 2) as well as Daly in *Gender in Education* (2004, p. 61) argue that an integrated approach to literacy in its broadest sense — reading, writing, speaking and listening — was the best approach to foster writing development in boys. They espouse the benefits of collaborative learning communities, group discussion and planning sessions to enhance motivation and success in writing exercises. According to Graham and Perin (2007, p. 12), pre-writing exercises engage students in activities designed to help them generate or organize ideas for their composition. I took this research as relevant because of the foundation such activities surely lay in encouraging boys to share their work and ideas and to be more prepared to write for a purpose and an audience.

Linked to the above, there is the notion that some boys see writing as non-masculine and as such are reluctant to engage meaningfully in writing (Younger & Warrington, 2003, p. 9). Without trying to tackle a tangential research topic, I believe that designing a writing programme that requires boys to write for a purpose and to be held accountable is one way of allowing even reluctant writers to be more productive. A lack of self-esteem can lead to disengagement and a reluctance to produce or make an effort as they feel their material is worth little. Carol Jackson calls this a “self-worth protection strategy” (2004). Peer reading of writing can help improve boys’ self-esteem and image of themselves as learners (Younger & Warrington, 2003, p. 4). The suggestion is also that boys may produce “average” work so that they are not marginalised by peers for being a part of either end of the spectrum. This notion is reinforced by Becky Francis and Christine Skelton (*Gender in Education*, 2004, p. 46). I wanted my action to test the effect of peer-reading feedback on the study group. By making writing exercises compulsory and then sharing the experience, reticent writers might struggle less with notions of self-esteem linked to attitudes to writing. I certainly do regard peer-reading as an audience.

Jenny Grubb (2001) identified the very positive effect of parent involvement, including modelling behaviours like reading and writing. This melding of purpose between school and home was highlighted as an element lacking in this action research project. Several parents referred to “stepping back” and having less to do with their son’s learning. Indirectly, this is associated with the research topic as I believe regular parent viewing and sharing of ideas can help with issues of self-esteem, the regularity of writing, and editing and proofreading habits.

A question as to whether boys react differently or are encouraged to a greater or lesser extent by different modes of assessment, including peer and parent comment, was raised in Munns *et al.* (2005). Caroline Daly refers to OFSTED research, *Yes, He Can: Schools Where Boys Write Well* (2003), which stated that boys should be given positive feedback and shown that their writing has value (*Gender in Education*, 2004, p. 65). The level and age of writers are of relevance here as boys respond differently at stage levels and within power structures. Teachers have recognisable authority in the eyes of boys, and standard marking and written feedback are expected without much consideration of who reads their writing, or why, and in what format feedback is given. This research question, however, is not dealing with the effect of different forms of assessment and related feedback. Suffice to say that teacher feedback does provide one form of audience feedback whether boys recognise it as such or not. In *Yes, he can: Schools Where Boys Write Well* (2003, p. 9) one of the factors that most strongly characterises the work of schools in which boys write well was the efforts made to make writing tasks purposeful, through seeking ‘real’ audiences, through publication and display, and through the use of writing to support thinking. Writing tasks should be tackled in stages, with feedback or review at each stage of planning and drafting. In addition, many students, boys in particular, seem to need to know that someone is watching over and caring about their effort if they are to see a clear purpose for their work and to experience tangible progress in order to maintain motivation. Boys in these schools know that their writing and their progress as writers is valued by teachers, since this is signalled in the way teachers respond to their work.

Portfolios can relieve some of students’ anxieties; giving them time to go over their work allows them to feel more comfortable and confident. Forcing students to think critically about themselves and their work is a good exercise in critical analysis that translates to the everyday world. Portfolios can be an ideal way of structuring the production of work for boys in preparation for viewing by an audience. This notion formed the foundation of the action undertaken in this research.

I decided that the development of portfolios seemed an ideal way of transforming individual pieces of writing into a cohesive whole that would be seen by boys as a single end item, an anthology of sorts towards which to work. The use of portfolios can be structured so that individual articles and the portfolio itself can be passed on for feedback to peers, parents and to any chosen audience. Essentially, it can be a “brag book” representing the abilities and creativity of an individual. I decided to use this format in my action research as a manageable and practical way of allowing for individual and diverse articles to be bound together for a single purpose. The idea would be that as boys added to the portfolio and received ongoing comments on their work, they would be inspired to write more, add to their portfolio with independent effort, work harder on polishing their work for their audience, and feel more confident about their work.

Research Methods

The study began with two surveys which asked for boys' opinions and feelings on the issues raised by the literature. Based on the survey data, a writing programme was developed that directed boys to write with purpose and in a format that would be shared with an audience. The final product would receive audience feedback and recognition. At the conclusion of the programme, data were gathered and analysed to understand whether the exercise had an impact on their enjoyment of and attitudes about writing – for the present and into the future. Had it made them more prolific, confident and powerful writers?

SAMPLE GROUP

The sample group consisted of fifty Grade Seven boys (aged 12–13 years). The research was conducted in the third of three terms, September to December, 2009, after which the boys left The Ridge Prep School to continue their education at high school. The complicating factors during data gathering were that the boys were excitable about nearing the end of their junior school careers and were extremely busy, particularly with sports tours at this time of year and with final exams mid-way through November to consider.

REVIEW OF CURRENT PRACTICE

In South Africa at this first year of a three-year senior level, the areas of focus in English are Listening, Speaking, Reading and Viewing, Writing, Comprehension and Language issues. Writing, therefore, is already a skill upon which much time is spent. At The Ridge the focus is to develop boys' writing so that it is accurate; shows evidence of good grammar and punctuation and clear expression; is appropriate for the task and in an appropriate register; and has suitable diction, syntax and sentence structure. In addition, writing is taught to be either transactional or creative, with several forms of both worked through during the various grades. Writing is sometimes linked to a setwork book, an experience or theme being dealt with at various stages of the students' development. Each piece of writing has its own rubric with an emphasis on correctness and completion to the rigours of the set task. Some pieces of writing are for a purpose; for example, to write and illustrate a children's book to be read to the Grade 1 boys, or to write several pieces that would make up a student newspaper. Most writing falls under descriptive and discursive essays, paragraphs, letters, reflections, poems and diary entries that stand alone but are linked by theme. Usually, discussions and lessons about planning, structure and content precede the exercises. Drafting and editing are usually expected, and art work occasionally accompanies the writing. In the main these exercises are marked according to the set rubric by the teacher and then returned to the student. After assessment, exercises are usually pasted in a book, with occasional class displays. Parents are free to see evidence of their son's writing in their books. Although portfolios have been discussed, they are not in use.

The philosophy behind writing at The Ridge is to introduce boys, at appropriate levels, to different forms of writing and to practise the language and grammar skills they have learned. Topics are usually set by the teacher and linked to other aspects of the English curriculum or occasionally other subjects. Boys are encouraged to be appropriate and accurate, but also creative and original. On occasion, writing exercises are designed for a purpose, to be shown to an audience or put on display. Providing a legitimate audience for boys' writing occurs infrequently with the creative process always prioritised over providing an audience for the final product.

Data Collection

Surveys: Survey One and Survey Two were designed to investigate the boys' attitudes to writing; Survey Two asked questions of a more contextual nature.

The Writing Programme: Based on responses from the surveys, the decision was taken to get boys to produce a portfolio of work. Each piece therein would have its own strategies and structure, but the intention was to have a concrete record of work for the period, something tangible towards which to work. Also, the portfolio would provide a structured and systematic record which peers and parents could access and comment upon. The content of the portfolio would consist of several core pieces of writing and further options for extension and personal additions. The portfolio implemented for this study included:

- A Tour Experience Blog (and several optional ongoing blogs thereafter)
- A Short Story Review (their choice of author and story)
- Their own Short Story (after going through a listening, reading, discussion strategy)
- Writing Day – What The Ridge has done for me or Me in 10/20 years (for insertion into the school magazine)
- A Free writing exercise (their own choice of topic or/and genre)
- Their own poetry creations
- General – any other examples of their own writing they would like to include

In addition to building a portfolio, along with preceding lessons on planning, scaffolding and structure, the following opportunities for sharing their writing were offered:

- Museum Week – On the completion of the portfolio, boys put up their favourite piece(s) for display to the whole school. Peers and teachers could make comments on the writing on linked comment sheets
- For the portfolio, parents and peers had to sign off on reading the content and give feedback
- Some items went into the school magazine
- Boys were encouraged to read out their own work aloud in assemblies and in class

Parent Interviews: While the boys had begun to work on their portfolios, parents were asked to complete a questionnaire on their understanding of writing as it stood with their son and the school curriculum. The rationale for this was to see whether boys were showing their writing to their parents and whether the subsequent feedback had an impact on boys' writing.

Interviews: As the portfolios neared completion, boys were asked to come in for an interview. They were interviewed in threes with chosen friends. The questions were open-ended with the general idea being to tell the interviewer how they had experienced the writing programme and what their thoughts and experiences were in relation to writing from before the implementation of the writing portfolio. While the focus of this research was audience impact, boys responded about several different aspects of their experiences of the writing programme.

Exit Survey: At the end of the writing programme, with all exercises complete, the portfolio finished, and the sharing and signing off of portfolios done, an “exit survey” was carried out with questions about the experience as a whole. The aim was to get final feedback that might illuminate whether boys were now inclined to write more prolifically, more powerfully and with more confidence either as part of the process during the writing programme or as a positive experience for the future.

Data Analysis

FIRST INTERPRETATION OF SURVEY ONE DATA RELATED TO PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE

Boys clearly understand the importance of being able to write well. Therefore, writing well is recognised by boys as an academic skill that is assessed and worthy of being worked at. Boys generally enjoy the writing projects at school and enjoy the actual writing process. Boys said that they best prefer to choose their own topics and genre. Boys like feedback from their teacher but state they don't like to share their work in general. Boys stated they disliked writing poetry the most, followed by factual/transactional writing. Generally any sort of creative fiction seemed to be the clear favourite with this group. Most obvious was the wide range of answers in response to a question about their favourite example of their own writing. Boys remembered numerous writing exercises that had stuck with them over the years. Curiously, ten boys said they had enjoyed writing speeches. Many said they enjoyed writing about their own experiences and creative topics. It is not clear why they remembered these writing experiences. A few said that they remembered these experiences because of the response they got from an audience.

Two statistics stand out as especially relevant. Forty-two boys stated that they enjoyed receiving feedback from the teacher. However, only twenty-three stated that they thought they would enjoy sharing their writing with others. When boys were asked to comment on what parts of writing they enjoyed, only two responses referred to an audience:

“Anywhere there is positive feedback.”

“When you get a good mark and you feel more confident for the next time.”

Clearly, without prompting, writing at school has not been about the responses of an audience. It suggests that there has been little audience for the boys' attempts at writing.

EXTRAPOLATIONS FROM THE DATA – SURVEY TWO

The majority of boys in Grade 7 enjoy creative writing at school. Fifteen stated they might write as a hobby. The boys unanimously stated that writing was an important skill and twenty-seven of the sample stated that they thought highly of boys who were able to write well.

Boys indicated they were really only aware of individual writing exercises or particular projects rather than any broader writing programme. Those exercises they remembered seemed to have had a definite function or focus. Most of the sample stated there should be more public recognition for being good writers.

In a ranking exercise, sport and academics were clearly most important in terms of being recognised as something at which to excel. Academics was ranked first while Sport, Music, Art and

Reading were ranked above Writing. This outlines a general belief that writing is not a discipline in itself but rather a means towards academic excellence.

In response to the question, “Should boys receive more public recognition for being good writers?”, Thirty-nine said “yes”; three said “no”. This suggests that boys want to be known and receive recognition for the things they are good at, including writing. When asked about forms of recognition, boys suggested displays, publishing work where others could see it, competitions, awards and certificates; and several said there should be more recognition but they were not sure what. The responses suggested that boys would be prepared for others to see their work if there were some form of recognition.

PARENT QUESTIONNAIRE

The responses were low, which could indicate that boys do not place much importance on having their parents comment upon their writing and so did not ask or encourage parents to complete the survey, or that parents were not that involved in their son’s writing habits and chose not to respond for any number of reasons. It seems that parental involvement as an audience was very limited and thus the effect on boys insubstantial.

INTERVIEWS

The following responses related to purposeful writing and audience preparation and feedback:

“I enjoyed the blog because I could say what I liked. I could say anything about the school, etc.”

“The Portfolio is a good idea – it shows a purpose for all the language and punctuation we learn. It was cool.”

“I really enjoyed it. I meant to blog more but didn’t have the time.”

“I liked the blog and the poem.”

“It was different –the portfolio enabled us to show off our stuff.”

“I liked assessing our friends’ poetry”

“Commenting on peers’ poetry was fun.”

“Writing poetry just for reading to my class or fun is so much better than having a comprehension on a poem.”

Joseph, who stood up and read his short story on stage in a whole-school assembly, said:

“It was nerve wracking, my legs were shaking and I was scared the school wouldn’t like it. I am very glad I did it. I felt proud of myself. It was a good thing and I think that boys should read out for an audience.”

There were several other comments that reflected on the enjoyment of completing the portfolio as a whole as well as the individual exercises; also several comments were in favour of the portfolio programme in comparison with anything done previously.

EXIT SURVEY RESULTS

Twenty-five boys said they would write more after going through this portfolio programme. Thirteen boys indicated they might do so, while another twelve indicated they would not. Six boys continued to blog occasionally for the rest of the term beyond the initial compulsory blogging exercise. Eight boys put more than one poem into their portfolio. One boy put four poems into his portfolio. Forty boys said they felt more confident about their writing after going through the process, and forty-six boys in the sample said they understood the writing process better after the programme.

Thirty-eight boys enjoyed the experience of having their poems read out aloud to an audience, and forty-one boys enjoyed displaying their work and indicated that they liked receiving the opinion of their peers. Museum week worked well and most boys were excited by the feedback they received. Only one boy was not positive on the benefits of developing a portfolio. The others said they were proud of it, felt good about what they had produced, or that theirs had been a success. All boys recommended that the following years' boys should complete a portfolio.

On the whole, the boys were very positive about writing for an audience. There were still a few boys who thought they would rather not put their work out for general feedback. As the boys began to realise that feedback was positive, they grew in confidence and became more and more eager for others to read and hear their work. Though the compilation of a portfolio seemed a chore at first, most boys were proud of this physical anthology they now had in their possession. Boys suggested that it was something they could take on to high school to demonstrate their abilities.

In general, the comments from peers, parents and staff were positive, some parents even indicating that they had been very surprised that their sons had produced such quality work.

Conclusion

In terms of the research question, the data appear to confirm that a particular writing programme can motivate boys to put more of themselves and more effort in general into their writing. It is clear that the writing programme with its pre-writing discussions, sharing of ideas, structuring of form and content and audience feedback assists boys in understanding the writing process better. This enables them to improve on their skills and become more powerful writers, particularly if they understand the purpose of why and for whom they are writing. Several boys indicated that they would write more after feeling that their writing had been more successful and being proud of their portfolios. This adds to the suggestion that some boys might become more prolific writers and that they felt more confident about their abilities. Receiving positive feedback and encouragement from parents, peers and teachers helped many boys to feel motivated and that they were getting it right. The programme therefore helped boys to become more confident and it is clear that the discussion around writing being non-masculine helped some boys overcome such anxieties. A programme where all boys participate, share ideas in pre-planning and writing, and then comment on each other's work helps them feel more comfortable with the process.

As mentioned above, the boys responded well to sharing their work with peers and having an audience of friends, fellow students and parents – and not just teachers. The boys enjoyed and felt motivated by reading their work out and having it published in the school magazine.

Further Research and Implications for Practice

The success of a writing programme depends on many factors, and there is no doubt the form that this programme took ought to be modified to make it more suitable. There are so many boy-targeted activities that can and ought to be tried. The same applies to using boy-friendly tools. In the future, the portfolio development needs to occur over a longer period and writing assignments planned more carefully along with associated pre-writing activities, discussion groups, resource use and outlets for display and recognition. More of a “big picture” approach to writing (integrated with speaking, listening and reading) in a year, in a grade, in a phase and in the school in general will go a long way to achieving the objective of making boys more powerful, prolific and confident writers. An ongoing search for valid audiences seems prudent. Given that there is a varied and changing source of audiences available for all that boys can produce, it will be up to the teacher to structure work for these audiences and around events that arise. The Australian online source, *NEWSADEMIC*, is one example of a site since found that brings up-to-date news and resources to students from which writing ideas and therefore audiences can arise.

Also, action research can be a very personal project and it can be difficult to encourage colleagues to be as enthusiastic about the action undertaken as the researcher. This can, and I believe did, result in different sets of boys experiencing the action in different ways.

As one would expect, the findings of this action research project raises so many more questions about boys, their attitudes, literacy and their learning experiences. Below are some related topics I believe deserve further research, certainly in our context:

- Using computers can help boys with overcoming some of the mechanical difficulties associated with writing. It does seem that boys want to present well and many seem to gain confidence that they are doing better if they are able to type up their work.
- How to get parents to engage more as an ongoing audience for their sons is a worthwhile question to pursue, given that the data suggest there was little sharing of written work with parents of the sample. The benefits of parents encouraging writing as much as reading from home would make for interesting research.
- There is a lot of research available on the role and value of portfolios, certainly not covered in this paper. Portfolios were well received as the cohesive element in our writing programme, but would they work as well if used every year or would the novelty erode the effectiveness thereof?

It goes without saying that educators will always need to select and implement interventions to find the ones that work best for students with different needs.

References

- Alloway, N., Freebody, Gilbert, P., Muspratt, S. (2002). *Boys, literacy and schooling: Expanding the repertoires of Practice*. Retrieved 11 August, 2009 from <http://www.gu.edu.au/school/cls/clearinghouse/>
- Collier, L. (2008). Widening the Audience: Students : Reading and Writing Online, More Thoughts on 21st Century Literacies. *November 2008 Council Chronicle* web page at <http://www.ncte.org/magazine>
- Darley, H., McGoldrick, A., (2006). *Bridging the Gap: Bigging up Boys' Writing*. The National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth, Retrieved on 11 August, 2009 from www.nagty.ac.uk
- Graham, S. & Perin, D. (2007). *Writing next: Effective strategies to improve writing of adolescents in middle and high schools – A report to the Carnegie Corporation of New York*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.
- Hilary C., ed. (2004). *Gender in Education 3–19 — A Fresh Approach*. Association of Teachers and Lecturers, 2004; Retrieved 28 July, 2009 from <http://www.atl.org.uk/>
- McMillan, J. and Schumacher, S. (2001) *Research in Education* (Fifth Edition). New York: Longman.
- McNiff, J. (2002). *Action Research for Professional Development : Concise Advice for New Action*. Researchers, 3rd edition.
- Me Read? No Way! A Practical Guide to Improving Boys' Literacy Skills*, (n.d.) Retrieved 11 August. 2009 from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca>
- Munns, G., Arthur, L., Downes, T., Gregson, R., Power, A., Sawyer, W., Singh, M., Thistleton-Martin, M., Steele, F. (2005). *Motivation and Engagement of Boys: Evidence-based teaching practices*. A report submitted to the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (Main report); Retrieved 7 August. 2009 from www.dest.gov.au.
- O'Brien, A., and Neal, I., (2007). Boys' Writing: A 'Hot Topic' ... but what are the strategies? *Education-Today*, Retrieved 12 August, 2009 from www.education-today.net/obrien/boyswriting
- Rodkin, P. C., Farmer, T. W., Pearl, R., Van Acker, R. (2000). Heterogeneity of Popular Boys: Antisocial and Prosocial Configurations. *Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 36. No. 1, 14–24.
- Promoting Writing in Primary School* (2006). Retrieved on 27 July 2009 from www.basic-skills.co.uk/tion
- Research briefing on boys and underachievement from the *TES 1 2001*, Jenny Grubb, Sally Rundell, University of Cambridge School of Education , retrieved on 21 January 2010 from <http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/research/boysact.html>
- Yes, He Can: Schools Where Boys Write Well*. (HMI 505) (2003), Retrieved 8 August 2009 from www.ofsted.gov.uk.
- Younger, M. & Warrington, M. (2003) *Raising Boys' Achievement Interim Report*. Retrieved 28 July, 2009 from www.rba.educ.cam.ac.uk/

Teaching Beyond the Classroom: The Use of Class Websites in the Writing Process

PAUL EMANT ST JOHN'S COLLEGE, JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA

Abstract

An action research project was undertaken at St John's College in Johannesburg, South Africa, involving two groups of participants. The group participating in 2009 was a class of Grade 10 English students, whilst the group participating in 2010 comprised Grade 9 and Grade 10 English classes. It is important to note that the second round of the action research process was not undertaken for comparative purposes. The research question focused on the way in which the use of a Google website encouraged boys to become prolific, powerful and confident writers. Data were collected from the comments the boys made on the Google site during the writing and editing processes, the pre- and post-questionnaires, interviews and discussion with the boys. After the process was completed it was noted that the boys were writing in a more 'prolific, powerful and confident' manner.

Introduction

According to Stringer (2004), teachers are "confronted with an ongoing series of small crises and problems that they solve using a repertoire of skills and knowledge" (p. 45). Stringer goes on to mention that a more formal research approach is required if the initial and basic forms of enquiry are unable to solve the initial problem. Action research is an ideal way in which to do this more detailed problem-solving. Williams (2008) notes that technologies "have changed the way young people communicate" and that these same technologies are "changing how young people read and write with words and images" (p. 682). She stated that the differences between generations are constantly widening. These points are relevant in the English classroom. Traditional writing tasks, written under controlled conditions, still have a place and purpose in the classroom, but more needs to be done to inspire students to write creatively and with purpose.

According to Williams (2008), young people are "reading and writing far more than they were 20 years or even a decade ago" (p. 682) because of online technologies. She also mentions that life "on the screen is an everyday, natural practice [and that] they know no other way of being" (p. 682). Therefore, in narrowing the research topic, it made sense to incorporate the use of online

technologies into the project. I felt it necessary to incorporate my students' interests with my assessment guidelines by using these online technologies in a formal assessment programme.

The broad research question chosen for this action research was: "How can we help boys become prolific, powerful and confident writers?" According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2006), "prolific" means the production of "plentiful" works. The use of the words "powerful" and "confident" are more complicated to define in the context of the research question. In my discussion with the boys, they noted that a powerful piece of writing is that which "[expresses] personal experiences" using "mature diction", has a "clear structure and intent", and "uses appropriate age grammar constructs and sentence structure". According to the boys a more confident writer is someone who "doesn't mind sharing his work with others", and has a "general willingness to make and receive constructive criticism". I was pleased that the boys' understanding of the terms aligned with my own. I introduced my topic to the boys as "How can the use of a Google site assist boys to become prolific, powerful and confident writers?"

After outlining the topic to my Grade 10s, I explained that I wanted to focus on social networking tools in the writing process. Richardson (2009) reminds us that today's students "are far ahead of their teachers in computer literacy" (p. 6). It was in this initial lesson with my class that I realised much of this process would be led by my students. It became evident to me that they "are creating content in ways that [I] haven't yet tried" (Richardson, 2009, p. 6). After much debate with my students we agreed that a wiki was the most dynamic social networking tool for purposes of my project. Richardson (2009), defines a wiki as a "collaborative Webspaces where anyone can add content and anyone can edit content that has already been published" (p. 9). My class and I finally agreed on using a Google site that has the same 'adding and editing' functions as a wiki. The reason that I felt this was the most functional tool for my action research was that I would be focusing on their role in the editing process, and this was one of the Google site functions that aided me.

St John's College, with 700 boys from Grade 8 to 12, tries to instil a culture of writing amongst the boys. They are required to write an array of tasks for the formal assessment programme and they are encouraged to write for non-assessment purposes. They submit their work for a variety of internal and external writing competitions and programmes. My intention with this action research was to correct my own prejudices towards controlled writing assignments, to continue developing this culture of writing among the boys, and to allow them a 'different' outlet for expressing themselves.

The Action

Writing tasks, in the South African Revised National Curriculum, are an important aspect of the portfolio assessment system. Two types of writing tasks are required: tasks written under controlled conditions, such as exam pieces, and tasks written as process pieces. The process tasks were the focus of the first round of action research, where students were expected to write an initial version of the task and then go through the editing process and improve on the work. The stimulus to this research was the fact that many students do not totally grasp the process of writing, where editing is essential. Hansen (2001) identifies the need to examine if "boys' writing dissatisfactions and negative attitudes in English are connected with the way writing elements and activities have been pedagogically and ideologically constructed" (p. 1).

My intention with this action research was to assess my own teaching approach to writing, and to allow the boys to explore a new and creative way to express themselves through the means of a class website. The initial teaching process for the first round of action research involved the reading of a selection of short stories, the teaching of the structure of a traditional short story, the introduction of the classroom wiki, the writing of the short stories online and the editing process. The second round of action research made use of class sites where the boys had unlimited editing rights and access, completing assigned tasks and, in some cases, creating discussion tasks for others in the class. Levin and Geldman-Caspar (1996), comment on the negative attitude of boys towards writing in that they do not choose different topics through which to express themselves, use different writing styles or enjoy persuasive writing. Their findings also state that boys are “more interested in the technological and creative aspects” (p. 432). Fundamental to this action research project was the use of the class websites. It is interesting to note that despite the initial setback of training the boys to work on the class website, it became evident that both sample groups enjoyed working on the sites and saw the benefits of collaborative exercises. The extent to which the boys’ writing improved is also noticeable. The first sample group’s essays improved over a period of three months, while the second sample groups’ writing developed from pure assessment-based tasks to some elements of ‘free’ writing. Some students, as an extension to the class site experience, developed and now run their own writing site called “Writers’ Guild” where they share and comment on each other’s work.

Research Methods

My research data were obtained from pre- and post-action research questionnaires, discussion with the boys, their comments on the Google websites, their peers’ comments on the sites, their sample essays at various stages of the teaching process, and the final essay. I felt that these qualitative assessment tools were most applicable for my action research even though Downey and Ireland (1979) state that “both qualitative data and quantitative data have their place in research” (p. 630). However, the surveys (Appendix A) undertaken by the sample groups, if analysed according to quantitative criteria, would not have been valid because of the small size of the sample groups. It is important to note that a qualitative approach would also give me rich holistic data.

RESEARCH SAMPLE: 2009, GRADE 10

The sample group chosen for the action research group in 2009 was my Grade 10 class. The nineteen boys in the class had varying degrees of academic ability and were from various cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. The most obvious example of this was that both the top and bottom English students in the grade were in this class. My initial observations and discussions with the sample group revealed that many of them were hesitant about sharing their essays with their peers. This was especially noticeable amongst those students in the class with the lowest marks. One of the comments from the boys revealed that he did not want to participate out of fear of being “teased by his friends”. I explained to the class that they would make comments on each other’s essays, with the intention of improving them and gleaning ideas from the collaborative process.

I also noticed an initial arrogance amongst those students who achieved top academic results. They were concerned that those ‘weaker’ boys would not be able to contribute to their essays at all. The class and I had numerous discussions about this and initially I needed to ‘guide’ the weaker students in their comments by directing them to various weaknesses in the stronger students’

essays. I also ‘softened’ some of the initial criticisms by the stronger students. It was noticeable that after a couple of sessions they realised what the requirements were in terms of their tone and the nature of the comments. Another aspect that was evident was that of their socio-economic status. Five of the nineteen students did not have access to the internet at home and three of them were boarders where the internet access was limited. As a result, I adapted some of the teaching aspects of the programme. Some of my lesson time was used to work on their sites, where my initial intention was to have the boys working independently at home on their assignments. This took the teaching beyond the classroom.

RESEARCH SAMPLE: 2010, GRADES 9 AND 10

My initial task in 2010 was to use the class websites for all my classes. This proved problematic for various reasons. In terms of monitoring the writing process and their progress within the action research, this proved too difficult for authentic comment. I teach four College classes and one Sixth Form class. At one stage of the research each student was commenting on the site on a daily basis. I could not keep up with their comments, and felt that the assignment was growing beyond my control. While this is an exciting aspect of the research, for the purpose of my analysis I chose to remove my Grade 8, Grade 12 and Sixth Form classes from the sample. The Grade 8s were overwhelmed by being new to the school, and were trying to cope with the workload. I felt that the class site was one more, perhaps unnecessary, strain on their already limited resources. I removed the Grade 12s from the sample group as they felt that their focus should be on completing the syllabus, and on their final examinations. Lastly, the St John’s College Sixth Form is unique in that it admits girls in to the programme. The use of the girls’ contributions to the class sites in my analysis would have skewed the data as the focus is on the boys’ writing. I do, however, believe that there is potential for the class sites to be used in these grades in future. The focus, therefore, during 2010 was on my Grade 9 and 10 classes. The dynamics of the class were similar to my Grade 10 class from 2009. They were similar in size, with 21 and 22 students respectively. The only English classes at St John’s College that are streamed according to academic ability are the Grade 11 and Grade 12 classes.

Data Collection

2009

My initial choice in using this class for my Action Research was based on two aspects; the size of the class and the short story module taught as part of the syllabus. The selection (Appendix B), as chosen by the St John’s College English department, depicts a wide range of short stories; some international and some local. Each teacher is responsible for teaching the short stories in the most appropriate way for his/her class. The basic structure of short stories is a fundamental part of the teaching process. I started the teaching process by asking the boys to write a short story under controlled conditions. They were presented with the task sheet (Appendix C) and rubric at the beginning of the lesson. They were required to complete the assignment during a 50-minute lesson without any planning. The Revised National Curriculum requires students to write creative essays as part of the exam process. This process has come under severe criticism in the past as it ‘enforces’ creativity without planning. The main criticism is that writing creatively under controlled conditions does not allow for any editing to be done. My intention with this action research was to

“[stretch] the boundaries of narrative writing, at least as conceptualized within a print-centric mode” (Alvermann, 2008, p. 13).

I assessed the essays without making corrections, and the marks ranged from 45–75%. I felt that part of the process should be that the boys not have any part of their essay corrected, as an important part of the action research was that they identify errors in their own and each other’s work. I did not want my initial ideas to cloud their own impressions. The boys were then asked to type their essay on to the class website without making changes.

The second part of the process was exciting as I asked the boys to read each other’s essays and make comments on each other’s work. The comments were restrained and polite. They were uncertain to what extent they should comment honestly on the class site. The usual pleasantries were exchanged depending on how academic the student was perceived to be by the class. One particular student, who was perceived by the class to be academically inclined, received numerous compliments about his essay. One boy, IW, wrote that it was a *“really good story, not much that I can comment on as I think you are, obviously, a better writer than me”*.

I proceeded to teach the dramatic structure of the short story. Even though this classic dramatic structure is most used specifically for Greek or Shakespearean tragedies, I felt it was relevant to teach this fundamental structure, as well as how it could be adapted for modern literature. Each aspect of the basic structure of short stories formed a lesson. I taught them about exposition, complication and rising action, climax, falling action and *denouement*. After each lesson, the learners were tasked to affect changes to their own short stories at home. My initial instruction to them was to increase their essay after each lesson by approximately 50–100 words. They were allowed to increase their essay by more. We also spoke about character development, plot, various themes, symbols and motifs, and they were encouraged to try to develop any of these aspects that they felt needed work. I made ten lessons available to them to work in class, but they were encouraged to work at home, in the library or in the computer labs in their own time. Towards the end of the term, I set a due date, and instructed them to work independently. After the process was completed, I marked and analysed their work using the ‘track changes’ function in MS Word. It became evident that the boys were eager to talk about the success of the process, and so a post-programme questionnaire was completed with various one-on-one discussions with me.

2010

After the first round of data collection, I felt it necessary to expand on my research. It could not be comparative, as I no longer taught the same boys from the previous sample group. I decided to focus on the use of the class websites in helping boys become ‘prolific, powerful and confident writers’. Each class was presented with a class website and given instruction on how to use it. It was interesting to note that ten of the forty-three boys had knowledge of the sites, and were instrumental in helping me to develop them. Some of the boys became excited when I informed them that they had ‘editing’ rights on the site. This particular function was nerve-racking for others, as they were nervous they might delete some aspects of the website. I explained that I could restore any part of the site they may have accidentally deleted and this reassured them. The focus of the sites in 2010 was allowing them to express their thoughts, ideas, and comments on one another’s writing and thoughts. I explained to the boys that the site was also partly an administrative tool, in that they could access the site from home, particularly if they were absent from school. The intention behind

this was that they would be able to keep up with the lessons, download the notes handed out in class and participate in classroom site discussions. During class discussions, we would often stray off topic, and so I decided that any conversation that did not directly relate to the lesson would take place on the class website. After the lesson, I would add the discussion topic to the site and instruct each boy to make a comment about the topic mentioned. There was one essential rule that applied to discussion topics: they were required to read all the previous comments, think about what was being said, not repeat any information and then make logical comments. Having learnt from the previous year's class websites, I decided to implement more rules from the beginning of the project, as I thought that the boys needed clearer guidelines. The rules were initially my creation, but the boys and I adapted them slightly so that they felt as though they were part of the process.

Results and Discussion

2009: GRADE 10

In terms of the definitions of “powerful, prolific and confident” writers, I believed that each one of these objectives has been achieved during the course of this action research. I was impressed with the self-realization achieved by the boys when they accomplished what they had thought was impossible. One particular boy, MB, expressed his surprise by stating that he *“did not realise that it was possible to write so many words in one story”*. Another boy, JW, was fascinated that the boys *“had managed to remain focused on one task for such an [extended] period of time”*. I was pleased when one group of four boys created their own site called the “Writers’ Guild”, on which they could share their previous pieces of writing and make comments that would allow them to develop their creative pieces. I also noted that they had created various categories on the website, ranging from short stories to poetry and song lyrics. As a result of their involvement in the site, their confidence levels had increased. One particular factor that did concern me with this group of budding writers was that it was a selective group of stronger boys. When I enquired as to whether or not they would open the group up to others, one boy, TG, commented that they *“would invite more people when they felt ready”*.

As mentioned previously I felt the need to ‘soften’ some comments and ‘guide’ other comments on the websites, depending on the boys’ self-perceptions about their academic ability. The strongest student in the class, RK, took offence to being told what was wrong with his essay by an ‘academically weaker’ student and made rather biting comments on the grammatical errors of ‘the weaker students’. JW wrote that *“I like your story, but wonder if you could make more of the characters’ development as the murderer!”* RK responded to this comment by criticising the author’s incorrect use of concord (you make/makes) and the incorrect use of the apostrophe in “characters”. I spent some time talking to the class, reminding them of the purpose of this exercise in terms of learning from each other. After a couple of lessons, I noted that the two boys had resolved their differences, and it was interesting to note the comments made on the site. The ‘weaker’ of the two boys commented that he felt that the *“dramatic structure is fine, but [the] climax is not intense enough. I think you need to bring it out using effective language and more logical reasoning on your character’s part”*. The ‘academically stronger’, RK, rose to the challenge and responded by stating *“[you] just wait until you read my essay tomorrow; a big drama coming up”*. I was intrigued to note that he increased his essay by approximately 200 words during the course of the evening. His main character, Inspector Andrews, he revealed, was the murderer he had been investigating. The effect

this had on the class after they reread his essay was astonishing. He had listened to the advice of a 'weaker student' and had improved his essay. JW's final comment was that *"it is an extremely clever story that no-one expected to end like this"*. This shows how both the 'stronger' and the 'weaker' students' confidence levels improved as a result of the action research.

The 'weaker students' worked on their essays almost daily. I noted that even though they were logging on to the site, very few changes were being made. Many of them commented that they were overwhelmed by the negative comments made by the 'stronger students'. One boy, AF, felt that some of the better students *"[were] picking on [him]"*. I explained to him that they wanted to help him improve his story. His story initially, was particularly limited and received the lowest result in the class. The boys were not aware of their initial results. The comments on AF's class site were appropriate, but he felt *"vulnerable"* because now everyone could see how *"stupid [he] was"*. I explained to him how important it was to accept positive criticism and showed him how none of the comments were personal, but rather comments on how he could improve his writing. RK commented that AF's story was *"not a bad story. Spelling/grammar needs work though"*. KR commented that his *"first few paragraphs were interesting, but then i sort of didnt know where it was heading"*. JW's comment was encouraging as he insisted that *"You can easily turn this into a brilliant story...try not repeating words too often and fixing up the way you have set out your paragraphs"*. I guided AF in reading these comments, and it eventually became clear to him that many of the comments themselves were flawed in terms of grammar, spelling and syntax. I sensed that his confidence levels improved once he removed his sense of the comments being a personal attack, and instead realised that they were constructive criticisms. Goldberg, Roswell *et al.* (1995), state that "research and practitioners' classroom experience repeatedly affirms that the opportunity to obtain peer response and revise rough drafts helps writers to improve their texts" (p. 287). This was applicable to many of the boys in this sample group, and certainly noted in AF's essay.

It was interesting to note that only 3 of the 19 students at the beginning of the process felt that they wrote well, according to the initial questionnaire (Appendix A). After the process and change in teaching strategy 16 of the boys felt that their writing had improved because of the class website. It was clear, though, that some boys still did not feel comfortable about using the class website. One boy, MW, observed that he *"did not like using the [class website] because [he] felt embarrassed about [his] story and didn't want other people to read [his] story"*. General post-action research discussion and comments from the majority of the boys allowed me, however, to conclude that the introduction of the class site in to my writing lessons did change their attitude towards the creative writing process. GV noted that it was *"a good idea and that [he] felt it helped [his] writing. CO felt it was "good, because of the commentary and worked better than commenting in class"*. DT voiced that it *"was easy to edit on the site"*. JW confirmed what I thought, and stating that *"the [action research] project was a success and as effective in the editing and development process"*. MB's comment highlighted some of the problems experienced in the project when he stated that *"when fully working and able to get in it was very easy to work and could take less time to complete the task"*. He also stated that another successful element of the project was that *"[they] could look at [their] peers' work to see their progress compared to their own"*. One of the weaker students, GA, who had initially struggled with his peers' criticism noted in his final questionnaire that he had *"gained loads and was able to improve his writing [because of] the constructive criticism of others"*. This comment was particularly important to me, in teaching the boys how to deal not only with their own writing styles, but also to be able to accept criticism from people

other than the teacher. One particular boy, MM, who joined the class half way through the action research process made a poignant comment about the process. He spent many hours working on the assignment in his own time, trying to catch up on the work he had missed. He felt that the project was a success *“in regards to the development of [their] stories”*. Numerous students felt that the “instant comments” were an added benefit.

They noted that I was not able to mark their work over-night, but that their peers were able to make comments that were helpful in the development of their stories. TG noted that for him the “peer criticism and self-evaluation” elements of the project were the primary benefits that he gained from the experience. Others commented that the class site was “good fun” and an “exciting way to learn”. One boy, IW, noted that *“some of the boys did not take it seriously from the beginning, but only became serious towards the end”*, and he also felt that the project would have been more successful *“if it had been started earlier in the year, instead of in the middle of the year”*. Alvermann (2008, p. 9) reaffirms most initial assumptions that young people “are more and more willing to invest a substantial amount of time and effort creating content to share with others online”. While this was a structured online endeavour and not a “free-time” approach by the boys, I believe that the project was largely successful in helping to create “prolific, powerful and confident” writers.

2010: GRADE 9 AND GRADE 10

At the beginning of 2010, I introduced the concept of the class website to my Grade 9 and Grade 10 boys. They were initially excited about the concepts and grasped it willingly. I used the class site as an administrative tool, as well as an opportunity for them to write. Alvermann (2008) notes that many teachers perceive that “young people are already immersed in the Internet and thus do not need to spend additional time there during school hours” (p. 13). Alvermann (2008) also states that the “work of literacy instruction is as much about listening and learning as it is about telling and teaching” (p. 18). This I believed was a greater contributing factor in this round of the action research process. I believe that this class site is an additional teaching resource and was helpful in ‘listening’ to my students and helping them to ‘listen’ to each other. I felt that the class website was an appropriate outlet for the extra discussions, as time constraints and over-loaded assessment programmes often hindered these discussions. I used a comment from RK in the previous sample group to improve on the quality of the site. He believed that *“the accessibility and user-friendliness of the site could have been better”*. It was also interesting to note to what extent their comments allowed the quieter students to become more ‘prolific, powerful, and confident’ writers. Those students who would usually shy away from commenting in class became avid supporters and contributors on the class site. I was pleased by this development, and also noted that this confidence carried forward into the classroom, where reference was made to their online contributions. This reaffirmed Alvermann’s comment about “how young people who are immersed in complex digital worlds tolerate our insistence on reading and writing linear texts devoid of hyperlinked multimodal content and opportunities for social networking” (2008, p. 14).

While the focus of the action research was the writing, it was important to note how much the boys commented freely on each other’s discussion topics. One of the first discussion topics that I set for them was on how they felt the class website would aid them in their English lessons. FE noted that the *“use of the [class site] will make life simpler [for the boys]”*. MA stated, at the beginning of the year, that the site will be *“a fun and exciting way to learn”*. I was surprised by RO’s comment that he felt

that the site “*would make homework fun*”. The irony in this comment is that RO was on a variety of medication to aid his attention span. I noted that at times during the course of the project, he became more focused because he considered it more fun. LR helped to vocalise the intention of the project when he stated that the use of the site would “*enhance [his] knowledge of English because [he] will have many different critics and positives on [his] work*”. It pleased me to note that the boys had followed my instructions before making their comments. One of the ‘rules’ for the guided discussion topic was that the boys become accustomed to reading each other’s comments and making comments on each other’s comments. Some of the boys noted LR’s comment, and identified for themselves the positives that he had already mentioned. One of the boys, LQ, highlighted that the use of the class site would “*create discussion*”. Thus, even at the beginning of the project, they were becoming prolific in their written discussion topics on the class website.

Although the writing topics were not used for assessment, the findings indicated that the class website had achieved a primary goal of the action research. KC, in my post-interview process with the boys, mentioned that he believed that the class website had “*created a fun environment in which to learn as [they could] all do it from the comfort of [their own] homes*”. OK, a quieter boy, powerfully and confidently noted in our post-interview process, that it had helped him “*see other’s point of view in terms of discussions*”. ZN confirmed Alvermann’s (2008) comment that most students have online identities when he stated that the website would be helpful as “*most of [us] are on the internet everyday*”.

The discussion topics for both classes moved from ‘free’ topics to a more serious academic approach. The questions varied from generic discussions about daily routine to questions based on the plays being studied that term. I asked the Grade 9 boys how they thought we could make reading *Julius Caesar* more accessible. It was interesting to read that most of the quieter students who usually require guidance and coaching during the lessons, suggested that we act out scenes as a class. Of the twelve comments made on that question, eight of them suggested performance as a unique way of approaching the text. The Grade 10s had a similar experience with the class website. Their academic style writing was focused on *Macbeth*. Two specific questions elicited more than twenty comments of substantial length. The first question ‘To what extent should leaders be ambitious?’ brought a combination of both academic *Macbeth*-based responses as well as personal opinions on what they felt made a good leader. The second question, also based on *Macbeth*, read as follows: ‘Macbeth is honoured by King Duncan for his loyalty. To what extent do you believe Macbeth is worthy of the honours bestowed upon him?’ This question, since it was more academically-focused, was the starting point for their academic essays. The boys were required to make comments supported with quotations from the text as the first part of the exercise. They were then required to plan and write part of an academic essay based on the comments each boy made on the website. Overall, the second part of the action research was important because it revealed additional uses of the class website, in helping to create prolific, powerful and confident writers.

Conclusion

The writing tasks completed after the introduction of the class websites, were for the most part, more powerful, prolific and confident. The boys involved wrote more, and showed improvement in their writing.

Participants benefited from the comments made on each other's essays and learned from one another. It was clear from their comments that they learnt to receive and make constructive criticism on one another's work. In the two rounds of data collection there was clear evidence of growth in terms of their writing. The eventual maturity of the participants in dealing with the class websites is important as it gave way to confidence in their writing ability and sharing of ideas.

I was pleased that the students no longer needed only my comment and approval for their work. They felt more confident to accept the comments made by their peers. The initial research action was taken done in the second part of the academic year, taking the place of the formal writing assignment. The second part of the research was implemented at the beginning of the school year and has established a collaborative sense of writing focus during the course of the year.

Despite the improvement in attitudes towards writing, some boys' writing did not improve, while other's did. The focal point for my next action research is to incorporate my findings and create a new writing programme using other social networking tools.

To conclude, the introduction of the English class website has to some extent enabled the students of St John's College to become more powerful, prolific and confident writers. It cannot be considered the only factor responsible for the improvement in their writing, but this action research would presuppose that it has had some impact on the boys' writing and their attitudes towards each other's writing.

Implications for Practice

As previously noted, class websites have a function within the English classroom, where the development of boys as 'prolific, powerful and confident' writers is the aim. I also believe that, in terms of South African schools and other southern hemisphere locations, a more practical approach would be to introduce the class websites at the beginning of the school year, which is January. The course of the action research project, from June to June, caused numerous dilemmas for the boys as the class websites were introduced rather late in academic programme. I also question the sustainability of the project in terms of the various deadlines imposed on the boys. The course of the initial action research project was three months. The boys and I were always conscious of the various academic deadlines and reporting procedures.

The second round of action research was more appropriate, as their term results were not dependent on their participation on the class websites. Another concern that reared its head frequently was that the technology was not always available. Either the network was down or particularly slow with a high volume of traffic, or the boys had forgotten their passwords. Future attempts at incorporating social networking tools into my teaching practice will include a fail-safe where the boys can use their cellular phones to complete the tasks. I will in future teaching practice, continue to involve my students in the choice of social networking tools to be used in class. I found that the inclusion of the students in this decision process was beneficial. Another aspect that I feel

can be changed in the future use of this technology in the classroom is the allocation of pseudonyms to the students. Many students, as previously mentioned, felt uneasy about sharing their opinion openly when their names were visible. It may make it easier for the boys if their initial identities are shielded from the others. A clear sign of confidence being gained in future would be that they would reveal their identities as they grew more confidence.

References

- Alvermann, D. (2008). Why Bother Theorizing Adolescents' Online Literacies for Classroom Practice and Research? *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, Vol. 52, No. 1, pp. 8-19.
- Hansen, S. (2001). *Boys and Writing: Reluctance? Reticence? Or Rebellion?* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Education Research Network, (8th, Spetses, Greece, July 4- 8, 2001).
- Downey, H. and Ireland, R. D. (1979). Qualitative versus Quantitative: Environmental Assessment in Organisation Studies. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 4, pp.630 – 637.
- Levin, T. and Geldman-Casper, Z. (1996). Informal Science Writing Produced by Boys and Girls: Writing Preferences and Quality. *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 4, pp. 421 – 439.
- Richardson, W. (2009). *Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms*. 2nd Edition, California: Corwin Press.
- Soanes, C. (Ed) (2006). *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stringer, E. (2004). *Action Research in Education*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.
- Williams, B. (2008). Tomorrow will not be like today: Literacy and identity in a world of multiliteracies. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, Vol. 51, No. 8, pp. 682 – 686.

Appendix A

WRITING SURVEY (THANKS TO B. MERRICK FROM BARKER COLLEGE)

Name _____

Please answer the following questions by selecting the percentage that you agree with the statement. 100% would mean that you fully agree while 0% would mean that you don't agree with the statement at all.

Me as a writer

1. I can write well.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
 2. I wish I could write better.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
 3. I feel I am a good writer in relation to the other boys in my class.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
 4. I feel that writing is an important skill.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
 5. I enjoy writing in my free time.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
 6. I enjoy writing for school.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
 7. I would like help with strategies that improve my writing.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
-

My writing interests

8. I prefer writing about images that I see.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
9. I prefer writing about experiences that I have had myself.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
10. I prefer writing about things I have read about and am interested in.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
11. I prefer to choose my own topics when writing.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
12. I prefer to choose my own genre (poetry, narrative, factual) when writing.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
13. I prefer to write while listening to music.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

Different parts of my writing

14. When I write, I like to have feedback from my teacher.

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

15. When I write I find it difficult to edit and make changes /corrections.

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

16. I find it easier to write when I use the computer rather than writing by hand.

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

17. I like to share my work with an audience.

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

18. Which parts of writing, if any, do you find boring?

19. Which parts of writing, if any, do you enjoy?

20. Describe a memorable writing experience that you have had.

21. **Post Action Research question:** To what extent do you feel the use of the google website has been useful in your writing assignment this term.

Appendix B

Selection of short stories taught:

In the Withaak's Shade by Herman Charles Bosman

The Necklace by Guy de Maupassant

Vendetta by Guy de Maupassant

The Open Window by Saki

The Suit by Can Themba

Small Things by Raymond Carver

A Day's Wait by Ernest Hemingway

The Catbird Seat by James Thurber

The Suitcase by Es'kia Mphahlele

The Lottery by Shirley Jackson

The Ransom of Red Chief by O Henry

The Haunted House by Virginia Woolf

Appendix C

CREATIVE WRITING ASSIGNMENT

Write a creative essay of between 300–400 words on **ONE** of the following topics, paying close attention to structure, diction, punctuation and spelling.

Use an introductory sentence to an existing short story as the first sentence to your creative writing. Rewrite the sentence as your first sentence and give your story an appropriate title.

The noon sun poured fiercely down upon the fields.

—*Confessing* by Guy de Maupassant

Over the great door of an old, old church which stood in a quiet town, there was carved in stone a figure.

—*The Griffon and the Minor Canon* by Frank Stockton

And after all the weather was ideal.

—*The Garden Party* by Katherine Mansfield

The room was warm and clean, the curtains drawn, the two table lamps alight - his and the one by the empty chair opposite.

—*Lambs to the Slaughter* by Roald Dahl

The town is one of those that people pass through on their way to somewhere else.

—*The Corner* by John Updike

I am on my four-hundreth-and-twelfth golf lesson, and my drives still have that pushed little tail, and my irons still take the divot on the wrong side of the ball.

—Unknown

Sometimes, to test my courage, I face students.

—Unknown

The telephone rang, and Richard Markham, who had stayed home from work this Friday because of a cold, answered it: 'Hello?'

—Unknown

Reflection

My initial reaction to being accepted on to the IBSC Action Research project was absolute fear. As the pre-conference reading and discussions were done and comments were made by each participant, the excitement, however, grew. Our initial meeting in New Zealand was one of great debate and confusion – I left the conference with many ideas and a sense of purpose within a similar community; not to mention the numerous friends I had made from various continents. The subsequent stages were discussed with Margot Long and Di Laycock via email and through the action research website. On numerous occasions Both Margot and Di were sources of inspiration and a calming dynamic that allowed me to see what was and what was not working. More clarity emerged, and my approach became clearer.

I am extremely thankful for the support that I received from my Head of English, Mr Rick Clarke, the Headmaster of St John's, Mr Roger Cameron, and the entire St John's College English department. They helped me to realise that self-reflection on my teaching practice was a personal growth journey that I will never forget. It has inspired me to see what I do, what my students do and how we interact within the classroom and beyond, from an objective viewpoint. It has allowed me to ask 'why?' and 'how?' and allowed my students, on occasion, to answer the questions for me. My perceptions have changed about the use of technology within the classroom. While I am a relatively young teacher I have an 'older' mentality towards technology. I have never totally embraced what my students accept as the norm. The incorporation of these technologies was foreign to me. A new passion for allowing my students to lead by example has developed. I have the content knowledge they yearn for and they have the creative spirit to make it relevant to their lives. A reversal of roles between student and teacher has taken place. Since completing this research numerous ideas and opportunities have emerged, allowing me to question other elements of my teaching practice. Action research, for me, has been an enlightening process that can be summarised by the last line of 'Ulysses' by Alfred, Lord Tennyson: "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield".

Discussion Boards and Boys' Writing

TRACY A. EWING THE PHELPS SCHOOL, MALVERN, USA

Abstract

Twelve students, ages fifteen to twenty, with non-verbal or language-based learning disabilities in the Academic Support Program (ASP) at The Phelps School in Malvern, Pennsylvania participated in a study to measure the use of discussion boards as a means of becoming more powerful, prolific and confident writers. Students were assigned various journal prompts during class and for homework, and they had to provide responses on a discussion forum. As a follow-up assignment, each student was instructed to provide peer-editing comments on a classmate's journal entry. Finally, students completed revisions to their original writing. Data were collected from writing samples, pre- and post-surveys, and focus group discussions. Results indicated that students' confidence in writing improved most, but there were also slight improvements to the quality of writing as well as the ease in meeting or exceeding minimum length requirements. Peer-editing also proved to be a valuable factor in the overall improvement in the boys' writing, in addition to having classmates' writing samples easily accessible. The results also suggested that using a discussion forum might not have been the most appropriate medium for the type of journal assignments given, but finding another technologically interactive avenue may be beneficial for future practice.

Research Question

How can the use of an online discussion forum assist boys with non-verbal and language-based learning disabilities to become more powerful, prolific, and confident writers?

Introduction

Anything that focuses on helping students improve their writing intrigues me. As a writing teacher in the Academic Support Program at The Phelps School, I am constantly looking for ways to make the writing process a bit more engaging for boys. The Academic Support Program (ASP) is comprised of students with various language-based and non-verbal learning disabilities, along with executive functioning impairments. The ultimate goal in any assignment I present is to make it meaningful and relevant to the students. When students receive what they consider busy work, they struggle placing effort into the task. Abigail James' research (2007) notes that when boys are engaged in learning, they tend to work harder on assignments. In ASP English, there is so much practice and repetition with the basic process of writing; it is imperative that all assignments have relevance and meaning. Because the writing skills taught are cross-curricular, finding a way to engage the students is critical to their improvement in writing.

Many students today are far more adept than teachers in use of technology. Boys are savvy and utilize technology to communicate, whether by social networking, blogging, text-messaging or e-mailing. It is important to incorporate these types of technologies into daily classroom activities. Fletcher (2006) suggests that boys are most engaged in writing when they are using a form of technology to write. Students become aware and appreciate that the teacher is trying to reach them on a level where they are comfortable; perhaps they will be more inclined to place more energy into an assignment. According to research by Hu and Kuh (cited in Laird & Kuh, 2005), students generally report positive gains in their education and personal and intellectual development when they have access to and use technology. The social aspect of using technology to write can also be particularly satisfying when compared to hand-written assignments. Author Ralph Fletcher (2006) suggests that writing should include a strong social component to involve all boys in the assignment.

The need for a real-life audience is also critical in motivating boys to write quality work. When students feel their work will not go unnoticed, they may place more effort into the assignment. According to research by Dyson and Freedman (cited in Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2009), “students must have frequent opportunities to share their writing with other young writers who can offer feedback on the efficacy of their writing” (p. 8). Incorporating technology into writing assignments is a way to force students to feel as though they need to engage their audience. With the use of discussion forums, students have a real audience of readers who will be able to view their progress and offer feedback to help further brainstorm ideas. These assignments also include a peer-editing component, where students have the ability to view common writing mistakes when they read their classmates’ assignments. Ralph Fletcher’s (2006) research indicates that sharing writing, particularly writing failures, is a critical component to becoming a successful writer. Perhaps the pressure of others reading a journal entry increases the effort placed into an assignment while decreasing self-consciousness. Since peer-editing is a regularly occurring event in the class, it can also provide a stage for celebrating imperfections.

When brainstorming for writing assignments, students in Academic Support classes at Phelps use a computer software program called *Inspiration*. *Inspiration* is a digital graphic organizer in which students can create tremendous and imaginative brainstorm webs (mind maps); students then have the ability to convert their web to an outline version with a simple click of the mouse. This enables the boys to utilize technology, which they enjoy, and yields more detailed brainstorm webs and outlines than they would develop on paper. While using *Inspiration* tends to be the fun part of the writing process, it lacks some interactivity. It does, however, allow for appropriate scaffolding since all *Inspiration* assignments occur in the classroom with my support and guidance. Hume’s (2009) action research study indicates that learning takes place when a scaffold is built and several areas or domains are addressed in writing activities. I would like to be able to provide a scaffold that enables my students to keep a running tally of their progress, but without the paper trail that usually comes from such tasks (with drafts, edited drafts, etc.).

Using digital technologies in the classroom and with homework should make editing a more effective process. The idea of students having the ability to provide feedback instantaneously is more efficient than switching papers with other students as is typically required. The sheer speed of revision is increased when students do not have to revise hand-written work. When using technology such as discussion forums, students have some freedom to provide feedback in a less formal setting. This scenario may produce more honest feedback as students should feel more

comfortable speaking their minds within the selected mode of communication. It should also work to give the boys ideas regarding the direction they could go with their writing. While the discussion board is just one way to edit interactively, it is a good introduction to the world of online learning. In this context, the goal of a discussion board is to expose the students to each others' writing and allow for interactivity, therefore enabling them to write more powerfully, prolifically, and confidently.

Defining Powerful, Prolific, and Confident

For the purposes of this project, the term *powerful* is defined as the students' abilities to effectively communicate their message in writing. Writing is considered to be effective when spelling, grammar, and syntax issues are minor and not repetitive. Powerful writing is also determined when the message is clear and well-organized.

The term *prolific* is defined as the ability to meet or exceed the required length for any given assignment. In all journal assignments, students were required to write a number of sentences, usually within a range. Their ease and ability to fall within or beyond the given range makes their writing prolific.

For this action research study, the term *confident* was defined as the comfort level reported by students when asked to share or edit their work with classmates. When boys are hesitant to share or peer-edit, they demonstrate their lack of confidence in that particular piece of writing. Overall writing confidence was determined by post-surveys and focus groups, but it was also specific to the particular assignment and the peer-editor.

Context for the Research

The Phelps School is a small boarding school for boys in Malvern, Pennsylvania. There are approximately 130 students, ranging from seventh grade to a post-graduate level. On average, about thirty students enroll in the Academic Support Program (ASP), which is designed to provide a small class environment and individualized education in English (grammar and writing), reading (critical reading skills and literature) and mathematics. While many students enrolled in ASP are typically diagnosed with a non-verbal or language-based learning disability, some students enroll due to processing issues, AD/HD, or simply the need for even smaller classes with more individualized support than mainstream classes can provide.

Boys in ASP English are taught in a process-oriented approach with regard to writing. The importance of transferring the writing process into other subjects and venues is stressed on a regular basis. Students are taught a variety of different genres but all major projects have the same basic process. There is a large focus on pre-writing and editing. Typical homework assignments include at least two journal entries per week, along with other various grammar and writing activities. A goal in the ASP English curriculum is to expose the boys to as much writing as possible, and also to provide accommodations and modifications based on individual needs. Sabornie and deBettencourt (2004) provide an effective approach to the instruction of writing in secondary grades which parallels the approach taken in the Academic Support Program at The Phelps School: allocate time for writing in the curriculum, ensure writing tasks are meaningful and practical, expose students to a broad range of writing tasks, and focus more on the process of writing.

Research Approach

The action research approach taken in this study was focused on examining what actually occurs in the everyday classroom setting and finding a way to improve it. The objective was to implement a new teaching strategy into a typical assignment and observe if the strategy not only helped the students to grasp the concept better, but also allowed for a more enjoyable learning medium. The approach was qualitative in nature and focused on the specific needs of the students. It was flexible and adapted to the classroom environment, allowing for the ebb and flow of everyday issues that may arise.

Research Methods

IMPLEMENTATION OF ACTION

The implementation of discussion forums was a three-part process. The goal was to establish some form of a baseline in the first phase before implementing the forums. Each phase had three steps: writing, peer-editing, and revision. The steps were repeated in each new journal assignment. Topics included quotation analysis, hypothetical scenarios that were often silly in nature (such as *Would you rather...?*), and general reflection. A typical journal assignment ranged from six to twelve sentences in length.

Before the first phase, students completed surveys which highlighted some typical issues regarding writing. The purpose of the surveys was to gauge the confidence level of the boys, to identify their interest(s), and to highlight strategies or techniques that they felt are helpful for writing. We also discussed the project in detail to ensure that the boys understood exactly what they would be doing as participants. Once permission letters were received, we began the first of three phases of the *action*.

In the first phase, the students hand-wrote their journal assignments for two weeks. These assignments were similar to the weekly journal assignments the boys had received since the beginning of the school year. After completing the assignment either for homework or in class, students switched journals with their classmates, read each others' work, and provided suggestions for revision. Before each peer-editing assignment, we spent time as a class discussing possible suggestions for revision and the idea of constructive criticism. Finally, the students re-wrote or made changes to the original journal. The first phase ran in conjunction with other various grammar and writing activities.

In phase two, students were introduced to the online discussion forum. Their first assignment was to request membership by following simple steps on a worksheet. Once their membership was approved by me, the first journal was assigned. The entirety of phase two was completed as homework assignments; the students were given a worksheet each night that provided step-by-step instructions. For the first part of the assignment, students had to access the discussion board topic assigned that evening and respond in paragraph form. Like the first phase, journal topics included quotation analysis, hypothetical scenarios, and general reflection. For the second part of the assignment, students read their classmates posts on the topic and replied to one post with some suggestions for revision. We discussed peer-editing again, and the students received a worksheet with proposed ideas for constructively criticizing their classmates. For the final part of the assignment, students read their peers' suggestions for revision and re-wrote or made changes to their journal response. We repeated this process for three separate assignments.

Before the third phase was scheduled to begin, I spent two full class days conducting focus groups with the students. Focus groups were not included in my original plan, but with various technological and logistical difficulties, I decided to use the pre-planned time to my benefit. In a casual forum, I explained that honest and candid responses would be most beneficial for the future implementation of similar strategies. I also reassured the boys that they would not be penalized for speaking negatively about the project. The focus group discussions lasted for two to three days, depending upon the size of the class period. I had some planned questions, but I mostly asked questions that were spontaneous based on the responses I received from previous questions. The students dictated their responses while I typed them verbatim, and then reviewed the responses for over-arching themes.

During the third phase of the project, students completed discussion board journal assignments in class instead of working independently. The process was slightly different in the third phase due to my reflection on the successes and failures in various parts of the first two phases. I also used the information gained from the focus groups to streamline the process and to attempt to eliminate logistical and technical errors, such as forgetting a password or slow/non-existent Internet connection, etc. In addition, I was present during the entire phase to provide support and suggestions to those students who struggled.

In the third phase, students completed two journal assignments on the discussion board during two class periods. On the third day, the boys selected a classmate's journal response and provided similar revision suggestions to those in the first two phases. The boys posted their suggestions on the discussion board for all to read. During the fourth class day, students made corrections to their original journal response based on the suggestions of their peer-editor. Revisions were typed in Microsoft Word and reviewed.

After the *action* of using discussion boards was implemented in its entirety, boys completed post-project surveys and attended focus groups. The survey contained some similar questions to the pre-project survey but also requested opinions and reflections on the actual use of the discussion board. The majority of the focus group discussion included comparisons between completing the discussion board for homework versus completing it during class. Finally, data were collected and analyzed from the surveys and focus groups.

PARTICIPANTS

The 12 participants in the project were English students in the Academic Support Program at The Phelps School. The students' ages ranged from 15 to 20 years old. Boys were selected based on their placement in Academic Support and their diagnosis of non-verbal and/or language-based learning disability, or an executive functioning impairment. All received parental/guardian permission to participate in the project.

Because The Phelps School is small (less than 150 students), the teachers in ASP have the flexibility to group the students themselves since the teachers know the students best and can match the boys with others close to the same ability-level. I chose to complete action research with students in the Academic Support Program because I wanted to find ways to meet their academic needs. The most effective way of completing the research without imposing my project on other teachers was to include only my students as participants.

DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES

Data were collected in several different ways. Students completed pre-project and post-project surveys. Additional data were collected in the form of hand-written journals from phase one, homework discussion board posts from phase two, and in-class discussion board posts from phase three. I also interviewed students in focus groups, where their responses were dictated verbatim to a Word document. Finally, I observed the boys while they were completing the in-class assignments and collected anecdotal data based on their focus and conversation with each other regarding the assignments. I also noted students' emotional responses when working on the discussion boards.

METHODS OF ANALYSIS

The pre-project and post-project surveys, while very similar, were used to measure any changes in attitudes and/or opinions from the beginning to the end of the project. The pre-project surveys provided a baseline of information regarding writing preferences and perception of writing abilities. The post-project surveys presented any possible transformation in the perception of writing preferences along with indicators for increased confidence with regard to writing.

The hand-written journals from phase one were used as practice for peer-editing. These journals are very typical of what is assigned on any given day for homework. Generally the boys have no issues completing said assignments. Following the journal assignments in class, students practiced peer-editing techniques as they were instructed. They were directed to look for obvious spelling or grammar errors and most importantly, to provide suggestions to make the response stronger. The responses were in the form of constructive criticism. Based on what I observed in phase one with regard to peer-editing, I revised my teaching strategies for phase two.

In phases two and three, data were analyzed by comparing the boys' journal-writing for homework and journal-writing for class. Analysis at this stage was difficult; there were many issues that prevented the students from simply completing the assignment correctly. I reviewed my written step-by-step homework instructions compared to my verbal step-by-step in-class instructions to see if one was more effective than the other. I determined the success of instructions based on how complete the assignments were in each group; I evaluated the students' forum posts as a whole for completeness (following length requirements and answering the question); and I compared the two phases for significant differences. I also examined the boys' suggestions for revision in both groups to assess the variety of suggestions as well as how repetitive the suggestions were. I analyzed the journal entries from beginning to end to find out if using the discussion boards actually improved the quality and length of the students' writing. Finally, I reviewed the final writing samples after peer-editing took place and revisions were made.

The final portion of data was in the form of focus group responses. I studied the responses from the two sessions and searched for common themes throughout. I also explored responses that would indicate an increase or decrease in confidence. Any response that indicated possible enjoyment or the opposite was noted as this was a key factor in determining whether or not the assignment would be repeated in the future. My goal was not only to improve the quality and confidence in writing but also to find a way to make writing more enjoyable for my students.

Key Findings and Discussion

The students' overall confidence in their own writing seemed to improve after using the discussion board. As they became accustomed to the idea of writing for the public (their peers), it became easier, and they felt better about their presentation in writing. On the contrary, many boys were unsure if, more specifically, the content of their writing improved but felt that misspelled words were easier to recognize on the computer screen in comparison to the hand-written journals. Many of the boys reported that they liked using the discussion board because it was easier to read their own writing as many struggle with dysgraphia. Almost all students felt that seeing others' writing posted on the discussion board assisted them in generating ideas of their own. This was particularly significant when the journal prompt was more challenging, such as quote analysis.

Most students reported that they proofread their work only sometimes, regardless of whether or not their writing was visible to other classmates. In my observation, proofreading was much more visible when the discussion board assignments were completed during class; however, I was present to provide occasional prompting and re-directing when necessary. The suggested revisions were much more helpful and direct when the students completed them in class as well, whether or not the peer-editing took place on the discussion board or on hand-written journals.

Many boys reported that they prefer to write alone and want feedback only from their teachers, and in some cases, their parents. Most did not feel confident in their peer's ability to find mistakes, and many felt ill-equipped to look for mistakes in their peers' writing. Coincidentally, almost all students wished they could improve their ability to spell and punctuate properly their writing. Spell-check was not a feature for the particular discussion board we used, and it was a feature almost all suggested as a way to improve their experience. Another common suggestion was more choice in the journal prompt or permission to write whatever they chose.

Most often, the completion rate and success of the discussion board assignments were dependent solely upon the state of the Internet on campus. There were more logistical issues than anything else. The boys reported that using the discussion board was frustrating most of the time, simply because it required more effort to successfully post a response than necessary. The completion rate was significantly lower in phase two than phase three. In addition, students followed directions much more closely when completing journal assignments in class in comparison to completing the discussion board assignments for homework. This could indicate that assignments with multiple steps require more time for introduction in the classroom for students with language-based and non-verbal learning disabilities. Many students were able to log onto the discussion board, but they had difficulty understanding their assignment without my clarifications as needed.

From my own observation, the design of the discussion board itself was not conducive to peer-editing. Many students had difficulty finding their peers' suggestions within the particular thread of posts. While it was somewhat interactive, it probably was not the appropriate medium to use for the type of assignments given. Finally, there was not adequate time allocated for the project to allow the boys to adjust to the technology and the format of the assignments.

Optimistically speaking, I was able to expose the students to a new type of technology by implementing assignments that provided plenty of practice. I did not observe vast improvements in writing that would indicate the project was a success; however, I do believe that the

sheer exposure to peer writing and the frequency with which they wrote did improve their ability to write more prolifically and powerfully than before. As a result, the students' level of confidence increased overall with regard to their writing ability and their comfort level using the discussion board.

Conclusion

Overall, using the discussion board as an in-class assignment (phase three) proved to be most successful in enabling the boys to become more powerful, prolific, and confident writers. While I did not observe a stellar improvement, it was most evident when they were able to write with technology and complete the assignments in class with my guidance and support. Often the boys requested my help when they were instructed to edit a peer's writing. They reported more confidence after much exposure and practice to the assignments, but their frustrations with the logistical issues made it difficult for them to enjoy the assignments.

Because the students were assigned a minimum length requirement for all journals, I was unable to distinguish if writing became more prolific as time accumulated. Regardless, most students claimed that using the discussion board and having the ability to read other students' responses made it easier for them to meet the minimum length requirements. The simple exposure to peer writing simplified the assigned tasks when completed on the discussion board. As reported in focus group discussions, the exposure also demonstrated the competitive nature of boys in general. When questioned about the benefits of being able to read peer writing, one student responded, *"It inspires me to write better than them."* Many of the students agreed with this statement. I observed several competitive comments during phase three, confirming my suspicions.

I also learned that peer-editing, while frustrating for many of the boys, did help improve their writing overall. Many boys reported they proofread more when they knew in advance that their peers would read their work. When asked how they feel about classmates reading their writing, one student stated, *"It makes me nervous because I am afraid of what people will say about me and judge me on my ability to write and my grammar."* Another student said, *"It would make me mad if someone made fun of me for being a bad writer."* This indicates that some concern about peer judgment may prompt more proofreading.

Implications for Future Practice

As mentioned in my results, a discussion board for journal-writing was not the most effective measure, despite my predictions. More often than not, students complained when assigned to complete journals on the discussion board. This was particularly evident when the journals were assigned for homework. I attributed the students' feelings toward the discussion board to the negative experiences they had by phase two of the project. Along with the technical and logistical difficulties experienced, many assignments were not completed properly, if at all. While this issue was temporary, it generally impeded the productivity of the boys' writing; however, the quality of journals that were completed seemed to improve over time, especially when I was present to scaffold.

Moving forward, I am determined to find an alternative medium for completing journal assignments while still attempting to make them interactive and technologically-based. I also plan to assign more journals during class time and to continue with a strong focus on peer-editing, even though many students reported discomfort with this stage of the project. Perhaps concentrating on peer-editing will increase levels of confidence and the ability to recognize common writing errors, especially with the support and guidance from the instructor.

References

- Dudley-Marling, C. & Paugh, P. C. (2009). *A Classroom Teacher's Guide to Struggling Writers*. Portsmouth, NJ: Heinemann.
- Fletcher, R. (2006). *Boy Writers: Reclaiming their voices*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Hume, A. (2009). Promoting higher levels of reflective writing in student journals. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 28(3), 247–260.
- James, A. (2007). *Teaching the Male Brain: How boys think, feel and learn in school*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Laird, T. & Kuh, G.. (2005). Student experiences with information technology and their relationship to other aspects of student engagement. *Research in Higher Education*, 46(2), 211-233. doi: 10.1007/s 11162-004–1600-y
- Sabornie, E.J. & deBettencourt, L.U. (2004). *Teaching Students with Mild and High-Incidence Disabilities at the Secondary Level, Second Edition*. Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education.

Reflection

The action research process was challenging, frustrating, and invigorating all at the same time. From the application process to the presentation, I stumbled across many speed bumps along the way. Nonetheless, the process proved to be an invaluable experience – one I will take with me through the duration of my life.

Attending the 2009 IBSC Conference in Hawkes Bay, New Zealand was one of the most amazing experiences of my life. It was my first time traveling alone, and I flew halfway around the world! I was excited and anxious to get the process started. When I met my team, I knew immediately that I would learn a great deal; I was surrounded by brilliant educators. It was amazing to discover a common ground with individuals from around the world who, like me, were so passionate about teaching boys. I sat in awe of my colleagues during the day and stayed up late every night brainstorming for my project. I was exhausted but it didn't seem to bother me, though I paid for this upon my return home! I felt so inspired and wanted to soak in every moment of my time in New Zealand. Every free minute I was writing, researching, or brainstorming with the team. Somehow we managed to squeeze in a few laughs as well!

I took away a great deal of knowledge from working on the individual project. It was frustrating almost daily and there were many days I was ready to give up entirely. The project did not go the way I anticipated or planned, and worse – the boys sometimes seemed discouraged and annoyed. We had many technological and logistical issues throughout which sometimes thwarted my plans. Luckily I had the ability to adapt to the situations and change the process if I noticed it was not working for the boys. Despite my initial cries of failure, I found the process opened my eyes to many new avenues of learning. I tried some techniques I never thought would work, and I was surprised by little victories.

I am so thankful to have had such wonderful guidance from the action research coordinators, Margot Long and Dianne Laycock. I received many encouraging emails that included the phrase “no need to panic!” when indeed I was panicked! The support from the team was incredible and it always came at just the right time. I am still amazed that a group of individuals from all over the world could come together for one week and develop such close-knit relationships – and maintain those relationships over the Internet over the year. I am extremely grateful to The Phelps School and IBSC for supporting my participation in the action research initiative. It is a most worthwhile endeavor and I am honored to be a part of it.

Using Boy-Built Grading Rubrics

BETSY KELLY ST. ALBANS SCHOOL, WASHINGTON, DC, USA

Abstract

The Form I students at St. Albans School in Washington, DC took ownership of the assessment process and created rubrics to evaluate their writing. Working in small groups, the students reviewed recent lessons, looked for evidence of those lessons in their writing, and devised a fair system of grading that included their writing intentions. They did this twice: once during a study of personal narrative writing in October and again during a study of the personal essay in December. Data were collected through surveys, class discussions, process papers, and on-line surveys. The response was varied, with students generally responding positively to the intervention in written process papers. Specifically, writers become more prolific, powerful, and confident when asked to reflect on their learning, when clear expectations are established, and when treated as valued members of a writing community.

Research Question

Much of the current thinking about the teaching of writing focuses on the concepts of relevancy, authenticity, and choice as ways to engage adolescent writers. These concepts form the foundation of my writer's workshop instruction and provide the genesis for this action research project. I wondered whether a transfer of grading power from teacher to students would support my efforts to create a fair grading system, de-emphasize the importance of grades, and help my student writers become more powerful, prolific, and confident. This hunch was based on my students' fondness for using writer's notebooks – a writing tool that is assessed infrequently, only once per quarter. In these assessments, students control what they want the teacher to respond to. I wanted to extend the role my students played in the assessment of large writing projects, so I designed an intervention that required students to create grading rubrics for their personal narratives and personal essays.

My interest in assessment stems from the vast amount of time my colleagues and I spend responding to student writing. Like scenes from the movie, *Groundhog Day*, in which weatherman Bill Murray repeats the same hours of the same day again and again, I often sit, purple pen in hand, and correct the same writing errors from the same students over and over. On the other hand, it is always validating and exhilarating to discover evidence of my teaching embedded in my students' writing. My research question – *How can the use of student-built grading rubrics help boys become powerful, prolific, and confident writers?* – was an attempt to transfer some of my power as the sole arbiter of good writing directly to my students. The use of student created rubrics, I hoped, would nudge writers to become powerful, prolific, and confident.

A powerful writer is one, in my mind, who knows he has something important to share with his audience and has the motivation to write about it. A powerful writer gets started quickly and is not afraid to revise. A prolific writer is one who elaborates and reflects upon his ideas. This is the kind of student who no longer asks, “How long should it be?”, because he isn’t worried he won’t have enough to say. A confident writer is one who initiates writing independently, explores different genres without trepidation, and welcomes a blank page. Writing helps the confident writer explore ideas and make sense of his life.

Literature Review

I began my research by talking to trusted colleagues about writing assessment and compiling a summer reading list. As I read, a gulf opened between practitioners like me and experts like Alfie Kohn. Many assessment experts, most of whom teach at graduate and post graduate levels, malign grades and especially rubrics. When students are graded, Kohn (2006) writes

They tend to think less deeply, avoid taking risks, and lose interest in the learning itself. The ultimate goal of authentic assessment must be the elimination of grades. But rubrics actually help to legitimate grades by offering a new way to derive them. They do nothing to address the terrible reality of students who have been led to focus on getting A’s rather than on making sense of ideas.

Even if I agreed with Kohn completely, grades are required at my school, and boys use them in ways that are almost instinctual: to rank, compete, and establish hierarchy. I wanted to find a way to change the culture of grading in my classroom only slightly, not turn it upside down as Kohn suggests.

Other researchers, like Carol Jago, take a more benevolent view of grading and rubrics. In her book, *Papers, Papers, Papers: An English Teacher’s Survival Guide* (2005), Jago sees rubrics as a way to manage the paper load and provide more time for written comments. This was an approach that felt consistent with my school’s ethos. By giving my students the task to develop rubrics I hoped to establish a clear connection between classroom instruction and student writing. Then I could devote more time to specific feedback in my written comments. Most importantly, I wanted to establish a sense of fairness, for this concept is foremost in the adolescent mind. Some of the most talented writers will stop trying if they feel their teacher grades their work unfairly.

Research Context

St. Albans School is nestled on a hillside below the National Cathedral in Washington, DC. According to the school’s mission statement, our 570 boys are “prepare(d) ... to develop and use their spiritual, intellectual, artistic, and physical gifts not for themselves alone, but in service of the greater community.” School days often flow into evening and are physically and intellectually rigorous. Friendships are tight, and many teachers perform overlapping roles as instructor, mentor, coach and *in loco* parents. In nine years, between Form C and Form VI, the boys physical growth is astonishing. When two seniors escort each C Form boy through the soaring Cathedral Nave during the school’s opening service, parents and teachers gasp at the three foot, one-hundred pound differential. In those moments, a quick glance around glass-stained pews finds mothers scrambling for tissues. But it is the students’ inner development that is most astonishing. Alumni

routinely remember their moral development and the ease with which they *take the hard right over the easy wrong* as the school's greatest accomplishment. One recent alumni stated, "St. Albans taught me how to be a good person. I didn't realize this until I went to college."

The Form I English program supports a boy's emotional development because it focuses on writing and the authentic work of real writers: examining the significance of memory, the origins of one's ideas and opinions, the connections between self and community, and more. Selections from boys' notebooks cover various emotional terrain, such as thoughts about baseball, ruminations about what happens after death, and whether God really exists.

Students participate in a writer's workshop and complete projects in genre-based units: personal narrative then essay, literary essay, persuasive essay, poetry, and realistic fiction. Workshop begins as I teach a quick lesson to the entire class, then it moves into individual conversations as students quietly write on laptops placed around the edges of our sunny, shared workspace. This format works well. Like any coaching lesson, I am able to nip bad writing habits before they take root. For example, some of my more loquacious students write with more words than necessary, so I might read over a boy's shoulder and make quick comments that encourage him to stay on topic, just as a tennis coach might help a tennis player with his serve. As I circulate around the room, I keep brief notes on my advice and the compliments I give each writer. That way, I keep my support focused and positive, and make sure I've reached every student.

My students use a writer's notebook, and they receive a new eighty-page book each quarter. Typically, the day they receive a new notebook, they also receive a small slip of paper containing short comments and a grade for the previous notebook. Despite the fact that I spend hours reading and reviewing notebooks, I downplay their impact on a student's final grade. In recent discussions many students pointed to the writer's notebook as the biggest source of writing growth, yet a few even forgot they were assessed at all. In a recent discussion one boy said, "*This may be unique to me, but I live in perpetual fear that I'm going to lose it (the notebook) since everything in my English work is in this book. It's a scary thought. But yes, it's definitely helped me become a better writer in many ways.*"

Because the notebook angles my students toward the work of real writers, I don't assess individual notebook entries. Instead, I grade the notebook holistically, once per quarter, and students mark the entries they most want me to read and comment on. If a student finds himself writing an entry he would rather not share, I encourage him to fold the page in half instead of ripping it from the book. I view these folded pages as signs that the writer is using the notebook authentically, the way professional writer records thoughts and ideas.

Selecting favorite notebook pieces allows my students some influence over their notebook grade (typically 20% of the final). I want them to understand that not all writing will be their best, so not all writing will be assessed. Rather, the emphasis is on becoming a prolific writer, one who practices his craft frequently, puts forth considerable effort, and grows over time. My action research intervention – student-created grading rubrics – is an attempt to extend my students' participation in assessment. Ideally, I wanted to share my power as the ultimate arbiter and give my students a stronger voice in the writing projects they complete in class. Was there a way, I wondered, that I could slow the writing process down and ask my 67 students to consider their upcoming grades one or two days before deadline? How could I draw attention to assessment in ways that are

supportive and non-threatening? Would the task of creating a grading rubric during a critical juncture in the writing process initiate an urge to revise? Could the rubrics help students retain new learning? Would student participation in assessment de-emphasize the importance of grades? In other words, how can the use of student-built grading rubrics help boys become more prolific, powerful, and confident writers?

Research Methods

My primary data were qualitative, obtained through surveys, written responses, and discussions.

My intervention, inviting students to participate in the grading process by creating rubrics, began approximately three days before the deadlines for both the boys' personal narrative project and the personal essay project. I separated each class into small groups of 3 or 4 students each, and charged them with the task of creating the framework for a fair writing assessment. In order to remember the skills taught, I began by asking students to review their class notes and handouts and look for evidence of that instruction in their own writing. Writing groups then worked together to create a grading rubric that reflected the lessons taught in class and their own writing intentions. A class discussion ensued and the separate rubrics were returned to me.

I gave my 67 students time to revise their pieces after they created the grading rubrics and suggested they use the rubric as a specific lens for improving their pieces. During this time I compiled a master version of a rubric, based on work of all the groups (Appendix 1).

Data Collection

Before intervention: My students completed a written survey (Appendix 2) before my intervention with a series of questions designed to capture a broad picture of their attitudes about writing. I also videotaped my classes as they discussed their attitudes about writing.

During intervention: In October, after the personal narrative project, my students wrote process papers that required them to reflect on the writing process, their attitudes about writing, and their views on the use of student created grading rubrics.

Post-intervention: In December, after they created rubrics a second time for their personal essay projects, my students completed another process paper. The format for these papers was identical to the first (Appendix 3). They also completed an on-line survey (Appendix 4) using an online survey tool, "Survey Monkey."

Finally, students were videotaped in March well after the intervention was complete and asked again to describe their attitudes about writing.

Data Analysis and Results

In the process papers written in October and December, 60 of 67 students and 62 of 67 students respectively, described grading rubrics in a positive light. Their responses can be grouped into eight general categories. A rubric created by students:

1. **Puts emphasis on the writer's goals and expectations for his own writing:**

"Creating a grading rubric with my partner was fair. It makes it so that you know what I was expecting of my own writing from the beginning. I know the parts of my writing that were good and the parts I struggled on."

2. **Creates a connection between the writer and his grade that feels objective and fair:**

"I think it was fair to create a grading rubric with our classmates... This way, no one can say that his essay was unfairly graded. For once students have a say in how their work is graded. It eliminates any possibility of complaining upon reception of graded papers, and it is a fair system for the students."

3. **Encourages students to reflect on the lessons taught in class and weigh their importance in terms of their own writing:**

"Mrs. Kelly emphasized many different things and we were to judge how important each of them was."

"When creating this I started to realize what was missing or what I should have more or less of."

4. **Alleviates grade anxiety:**

"It is reassuring that the grade the writer has is unbiased from the teacher."

5. **Promotes collaboration between students:**

"I believe it was fair for the students to create the grading rubric because my classmates and I should be able to judge... because we were the ones to write it (the rubric) and we know how difficult the assignment really was."

6. **Fosters collaboration between students and teacher:**

"No teacher in my previous classes has ever let their students make the grading rubric so I found that really cool. Also, the idea of letting us correct our work after you have critiqued it is a great idea. I find it fair and appropriate to allow us to learn from our mistakes."

7. **Demystifies the grading process:**

"I thought it was fair for us to create a grading rubric. By letting the class create a grading system, everyone knows that the grading isn't biased toward the teacher's writing style. Also, by creating a grading rubric with my classmates I know what aspects of the essay will be graded and I almost know what to expect when I receive my grade. When the class makes the grading rubric, the grades can't be unfair."

8. Establishes a tone of trust and support:

"It made me feel important and that I had some control over my grade."

"This gives the students the chance to make the rubric the way that they think it is fair. This also improves their honor, to make a fair rubric, and not to make a rubric so the person can get an A."

"I do feel it is fair for us to be able to create a grading rubric. In the past I feel I have gotten papers back and I got points off for things that I feel missed the point of the essay. Making the grading rubric with my classmates is a good and fair way of saying what we think is important in an essay and what should be noted."

Positive feedback was less evident in March when the boys completed an online survey using "Survey Monkey." The results showed that 23% of the students felt that student-created rubrics were "a very effective way to improve writing" (Appendix 4). There are two possible explanations for this. First, the on-line survey described "becoming a better writer" in very narrow terms. When the responses to the three positive categories are added together (*somewhat helped me, important step in helping me, very effective way to improve my writing*), the overall positive impact of student-created rubrics rises to 89%. Second, the on-line survey was administered in March, several months after the intervention was complete, so the experience was not fresh in the students' minds. For these reasons, I decided to rely on my students' written responses more heavily when drawing my conclusions.

Conclusion

Student-created rubrics are one way to create writers who are powerful, prolific, and confident. When students are charged with the task to find evidence of their teacher's lessons in their writing, they are forced to become more reflective learners. Our biggest expectation – that students should practice what we teach them – becomes explicit when we ask them to build rubrics around recent lessons. Finally, when the power of assigning grades is transferred, students feel a greater sense of ownership and engagement in the writing process. They feel powerful.

Students become more prolific when they create rubrics – especially in the final days of revision – because it nudges them to go back and elaborate on their ideas. This was evident in the personal essay unit, for many 7th graders let their ideas 'float' without substantiation. Often the push to explain one's reasons and look at an idea from all angles causes students to elaborate, to become prolific.

Finally, students become more confident when they create rubrics because they are the arbiters of good writing. This feeds the humming engine of competition present in the all-boys' classroom. When boys are able to judge their writing alongside their peers they begin to envision possibilities for their own writing.

Implications for the Future

I would like to continue this process by having students use highlighters to mark rubrics for anonymous sets of student papers. This could be done at the beginning of a writing project so students could read exemplary pieces and envision how their writing could go before they even set pen to paper. During the revision stage, writing partnerships could do this together with their drafts.

This project shows that engagement in writing increases when students are given the opportunity to reflect on their learning, when clear expectations are established, and when adolescents are treated as valued members of a writing community. Student-created rubrics are only one way to promote these conditions.

Appendix 1

Personal Narrative Rubric:

Teacher Comments:

The writer was open to suggestions from his teacher and used his class time well. (10 points)	
The writer included figurative language such as similes, metaphors, and personification in order to bring out both the internal and external story. The lead and ending were effective. (25 points)	
Overall, the story flows well and the sequence makes sense. The climax was described in detail and the writer attempted to use present tense to make his narrative 'pop.' There were very few "Starbucks" words. (25 points)	
The writer used dialogue and internal thought effectively to keep the story alive, and he chose important details to move the story along. (25 points)	
There were few errors in grammar, spelling and punctuation (15 points)	

Kelly and students, 2009

Personal Essay Rubric:

Teacher Comments:

A clearly worded thesis statement is located at the end of the introductory paragraph. (25 points)	
The topic sentence of each supporting paragraph refers directly to the thesis. The concluding sentence of each supporting paragraph ties the example to the thesis statement. (25 points)	
The conclusion deepens the original thesis. (25 points)	
Grammar, spelling and punctuation errors are minimal. (25 points)	

Kelly and students, 2009

Appendix 2

WRITING SURVEY

Name _____

Please answer the following questions by selecting the percentage that you agree with the statement. 100% would mean that you fully agree while 0% would mean that you don't agree with the statement at all.

Me as a writer

1. I can write well.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
2. I wish I could write better.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
3. I feel I am a good writer in relation to the other boys in my class.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
4. I feel that writing is an important skill.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
5. I enjoy writing in my free time.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
6. I enjoy writing for school.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
7. I would like help with strategies that improve my writing.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

My writing interests

8. I prefer writing about images that I see.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
9. I prefer writing about experiences that I have had myself.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
10. I prefer writing about things I have read about and am interested in.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
11. I prefer to choose my own topics when writing.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
12. I prefer to choose my own genre (poetry, narrative, factual) when writing.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
13. I prefer to write while listening to music.
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

Different parts of my writing

14. When I write, I like to have feedback from my teacher.

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

15. When I write I find it difficult to edit and make changes /corrections.

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

16. I find it easier to write when I use the computer rather than writing by hand.

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

17. I like to share my work with an audience.

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

18. Which parts of writing, if any, do you find boring?

19. Which parts of writing, if any, do you enjoy?

20. Describe a memorable writing experience that you have had.

21. **Post Action Research question:** To what extent do you feel the use of the google website has been useful in your writing assignment this term.

Appendix 3

OCTOBER AND DECEMBER PROCESS PAPERS

Please take a few minutes to reread your recent piece, and then reflect on the following topics in a series of paragraphs.

1. **Describe what you like about the piece.** Perhaps the topic is a particularly good memory, one you enjoy recalling. Conversely, perhaps it took a tremendous amount of courage to write about a particularly painful episode in your life. **What is your favorite part?** Are there any specific lines you are particularly proud of? Use quotes from the text to support your answers.
2. **How did you feel about the writing process?** Specifically, was it enjoyable to write the entire piece in class? Was the process too slow? Too quick? Please don't spend much time reflecting on the computers or their glitches. Instead, think about writing at home vs. writing at school.
3. **What did you learn while writing?** Was this material new for you or was it a review?
4. **Was it helpful to show your piece to 3 others and get their feedback?** Was this something you would like to do again? Why or why not?
5. **Reflect on the grading.** Did it feel fair to create a **grading rubric** with your classmates? Did you feel the grade you received was fair? Why or why not? Reflect on the opportunity to earn extra points by revising your piece one last time in class – after grading. How did this feel for you?
6. **Last but not least: how do you feel about writing right now?** Do you enjoy it more or less than you did when school started?

Please be honest when writing these responses. There are no right or wrong answers.

Appendix 4

7. Consider the following types of responses you've received this year and determine whether they've helped you become a more prolific, confident, and powerful writer.

answered question						57
skipped question						6
	This did not help me become a better writer at all.	This somewhat helped me become a better writer.	This was an important step in becoming a better writer.	This was a very effective way to improve my writing.	Rating Average	Response Count
Student-created rubrics.	10.5% (6)	33.3% (19)	33.3% (19)	22.8% (13)	2.68	57
Teacher's written feedback.	0.0% (0)	5.3% (3)	40.4% (23)	54.4% (31)	3.49	57
Teacher's individual conferences with me.	1.8% (1)	14.0% (8)	33.3% (19)	50.9% (29)	3.33	57
Responses from 3 trusted reviewers on grid sheet.	17.5% (10)	31.6% (18)	28.1% (16)	22.8% (13)	2.56	57
The process papers that described the decisions I made as a writer.	19.3% (11)	40.4% (23)	28.1% (16)	12.3% (7)	2.33	57

Appendix 5

LITERATURE REVIEW

Eschola, P. and Rosa, A. (2007). *Models for Writers: Short Essays for Composition*. Massachusetts: Bedford/St. Martins

Culled mainly from a wide range of 20th century sources, this book is loaded with short narrative and expository texts teachers can use in the classroom as exemplary models. Recognizing that it is not necessary to read the book cover to cover, the authors divided the book into four sections: Reading and Writing Well, Elements of the Essay, Language of the Essay, and Types of Essay. Teachers can search for a favorite author, a particular concept (“Effective Sentences”) or even a thematic unit. The appendix entitled “Writing a Research Paper” is an additional resource for students.

Hawley, R. (1994). *The Romance of Boys Schools*. Ohio: University School Press.

This text is a reprint of Richard Hawley’s presentation at the 1994 AHISA Conference of Single Sex Education. Hawley believes we entirely miss the mark when we describe our schools in terms of test score and college admissions data. Our most important characteristic is the data of our collective stories. Our lives in boys’ schools are unique because they “rise to the contours of a story, and when that happens we are vividly alive and awake.” In order to draw our attention to what boys value, Hawley retells a few stories from *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*, *Mister Chips* and Cleveland’s University School. Specifically, boys tend to celebrate the eccentricity, longstanding service, and “the private happiness, observable and available, which makes man’s work credible and appealing to a boy.” While this text never mentions assessment, it reminded me to reconsider my responsibility to honor the stories my students write.

Huot, B. (2002). *(Re) Articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning*. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press.

Brian Huot wants us all to realize that assessment should promote good teaching and his book lifts the rock so we can look at the way writing assessment is currently constructed. Grading, testing, assessing and responding are very separate processes that are currently lumped together. Students should be assessed frequently so teachers can find the tracks of our good teaching, they need frequent response, and should be tested and graded as little as possible. There is lots of negative here and few answers, but I came away with the following good points. Students will only be willing to revise if they can feel in their bones that a piece of writing works (or not). So teachers have a responsibility to explicitly teach this skill which he has dubbed, ‘instructive evaluation’. We must make her aware “of what it is she is trying to create and how well her current draft matches the linguistic and rhetorical targets she has set for herself. Targets that come from her understanding of the context, audience, purpose etc.” When reading student writing, teachers must stop playing the “believing or doubting game,” stop reading for mistakes, and hold ourselves accountable for the same standards we teach our students when writing responses.

Kohn, A. (2004) Feel-Bad Education: The Cult of Rigor and the Loss of Joy. *Education Week*, September 15, 2004.

Alfie Kohn is a prophetic writer who reminds us what we already know – that schools should be places of joy and inquiry. Once this is established, rigor follows – not the other way around. Describing a culture in which students are “regarded not as subjects, but as objects,” he takes the education establishment to task for getting rid of recess, enacting NCLB, and creating a culture of “workers, not learners”. More importantly, he takes teachers and principals to task for allowing this to happen in the first place. This is a thought provoking article with a clear message that should be revisited each September.

Kohn, Alfie (2006) The Trouble with Rubrics. *English Journal*, March 2006 (vol. 95, No. 4)

Kohn, A. (1999). From Degrading to De-Grading. *High School Magazine*, 1999

In this article Kohn delves into nine arguments against traditional grades and numeric scores:

1. Grades tend to reduce students' interest in the learning process.
2. Grades tend to reduce students' preference for challenging tasks.
3. Grades tend to reduce the quality of students' thinking.
4. Grades aren't valid, reliable, or objective.
5. Grades distort the curriculum.
6. Grades waste a lot of time that could be spend on learning.
7. Grades encourage cheating.
8. Grades spoil teachers' relationships with students.
9. Grades spoil students' relationships with each other.

Thankfully, Kohn finally gets around to alternatives. Personally, this advice validated one aspect of my practice, “Finally, there is the question of what classroom teachers can do while grades continue to be required. The short answer is that they should do everything within their power to make grades as invisible as possible for as long as possible. Helping students forget about grades is the single best piece of advice for creating a learning-oriented classroom.”

Rief, L. (1992). *Seeking Diversity: Language Arts with Adolescents*. New Hampshire: Heinemann.

Linda Rief uses student writing from previous years to teach students to assess their own writing. She asks students to read each piece, assign a holistic score between 1 (ineffective) and 4 (most effective) and jot down three reasons for each particular score. The class discusses each paper and reaches a consensus on the criteria for effective writing. This criteria becomes the grading rubric. In addition, Rief asks her students to complete a process paper for each graded assignment based on the following: *Tell me everything you can about how this piece of writing came to be. What do you want me to know about the writing of this that I wouldn't know from reading it? What are your reasons for giving it a particular grade?* This book is a window into good classroom practice and highlights new ways I can assess and respond to student writing.

Romano, T. (2000). *Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing Multigenre Papers*. New Hampshire: Heinemann.

When grading papers, Romano believes, “We can never entirely escape our own subjectivity. That’s why I seek to make my own subjectivity as informed as possible” So he seeks his students’ perceptions about their work before he assesses them. Sample questions he asks:

- What surprised you as you were working through this piece?
- Speak freely about any aspect of this paper you would like advice on.
- Tell me about the best part of this paper and describe why it is best.
- Tell me about the weakest part of this paper and describe why it is weakest.
- What did you learn as a result of writing this?

Romano also reminds us to recognize and applaud approximation, “*Close counts for a great deal when people are learning new things and taking risks.*”

Straub, R. (1999). *A Sourcebook for Student Writing*. New Jersey: Hampton Press, Inc.

This is a fascinating and practical text. The first half reprints student essays with responses from ‘expert teachers,’ and the second half contains essays on teacher response. Peter Elbow’s essay, ‘Options for Responding to Student Essays,’ was the most interesting to me. Elbow’s procedure:

- Asks for a process piece from each student that describes how the writing went for them
- Glances through the responses of other students.
- Reads the entire piece, making slight pencil marks on great parts/troublesome parts.
- Writes the student a note that describes the “movie in the mind” as he was reading. He describes his responses while reading and makes it clear that this is personal and subjective. This way an epiphany for me. I’ve always tried to develop systems that make the grading seem objective. Grading papers is a subjective process, and it’s time to make that clear.
- Praises the strengths and potential strengths in the text.
- Describes the text dispassionately – discourse analysis.
- Focuses on one problem the student can work on.
- When returning papers he asks students to write a note describing his comments and their reactions. This provides immediate feedback on the effectiveness of his comments and gives him a chance to clarify student confusion.

Wilson, M. (2006). *Rethinking Rubrics in Writing Assessment*. New Hampshire: Heinemann.

Maja Wilson traces the trajectory of rubrics, then takes several chapters to debunk their practice in sensible, forehead slapping ways. Unfortunately, her alternatives are limited in practicality and scope. Still, it's worth noting the following:

- We should look for the overlaps in what we do with literature and what we do with writing. Writers should understand that each reader brings a different set of experiences and expectations to a text – the basis of discussion when we examine a good piece of writing. Therefore assessment should be based in response and lead the writer to new insights.
- Writers should acquire as many readers as possible, evaluate the advice given and revise according to the writer's purpose and audience. Writers should think through and compare what they want to express with the reaction of the reader. This rhetorical heart is what is missing in any standards based rubric.
- The ability to teach students “to write effectively depends on our students’ desire to be understood and on a clear, honest articulation of how their words affect us.”

Reflection

As a product of the 1970's, I'm a risk-taker, slightly anti-authoritarian, and somewhat impulsive: a perfect candidate for Action Research! After the 2009 conference in New Zealand, Di and Margot trimmed my sails and suggested I throw my plans to research three aspects of the teaching of writing – response, evaluation, and assessment – overboard. Instead, they wisely encouraged me to find a map and plan a day trip instead of sail around the world. So if these seasoned captains weren't onboard, I would still be in the Flying Dutchman trying to round the Cape of Good Hope right now.

I'm so glad I jumped at the chance to participate in this project, and am grateful to another captain, Headmaster Vance Wilson, for supporting my efforts to help our students become more prolific, powerful, and confident writers.

Most of all I thank my crew, the Form I students at St. Albans, for taking the journey and supporting my efforts to become a better writing teacher. Last summer, when reading about assessment and evaluation, I was amazed at the infrequency students were mentioned. This is why Action Research in the classroom is so critical. Students are the stars by which we navigate and "experts" who write about education aren't with us when we teach. Students are. They inform our practice in profound ways and we need to learn how to listen closely in order to determine the direction our teaching needs to go. This is the biggest lesson I've learned by participating in this project. It was the journey, not the destination that mattered. I've become a better teacher because I'm a more reflective practitioner. Thank you IBSC!



office@theibsc.org • www.theibsc.org

Book design by DH2 Design Communications www.dh2.com