The Impact of Dialogue Journals on Elementary Student Writing

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Dialogue journaling is a strategy used by writers around the world. Typically, dialogue journals are shared between a less proficient writer and a more proficient writer. They are designed to improve literacy development, behavior problems, and relationships by lessening the anxiety people often have about writing (Grande, 2008). Dialogue journals are intended to be used as a written conversation with topics ranging from a teacher-selected prompt about curriculum to a student’s own life experiences (Linnell, 2010). Researchers suggest dialogue journals function best if they are implemented on a regular basis with minimal corrective feedback (Denne-Bolton, 2013; Grande; Peyton, 2000). With the proper, consistent use of dialogue journals, studies suggest they will be a natural motivator for young writers (Denne-Bolton, 2013). The intention of this study is to see how the use of dialogue journals impacts elementary students’ writing skills and motivation by providing them with opportunities to write without the fear of being critiqued.

For this action research study, the school used is located in an urban area of the southeastern United States. It is a public elementary school serving Kindergarten through fifth grade. The school is part of a city school system. At the time of the study the school’s population was made up of 512 students of whom 258 were female, and 254 were male. There were 483 African American students, 15 white students, 12 Hispanic students, and 2 students of other
backgrounds. About 90% of the students were on a free and reduced breakfast and lunch plan through the school program. It is also a Title I school.

The class with which I worked was a fourth grade made up of 20 students. Nine were female and eleven were male. There were 17 African American students, two Hispanic students, and one white student. One of the students was an English Language Learner, and seven had Individualized Education Plans.

The class was self-contained and functioned in a departmentalized grade level. The class identified for this study visited three other classrooms each day for social studies/science, language arts, and mathematics instruction. They remained in the homeroom classroom for reading and writing instruction. The students sat in unique groupings throughout the classroom. There were two groups of five desks, one group of four desks, and another group of six desks. The students primarily did independent work at their desks, and if they were working in groups on center work, they were moved to other areas of the room. Most whole group instruction is done with students sitting at their desks. There was a balance between whole group, small group, and individualized teacher intervention.

In the class there was a problem with engagement and motivation during writing instruction. For most writing assignments, students did not exhibit the drive to do their best work, use their best penmanship, and provide adequate detail in their pieces. They seemed to view written assignments as boring or tedious, so the teacher was not able to effectively teach writing skills or assess written work due to the lack of performance. Even with graphic organizers or simple response questions, the teacher received sloppy, vague, and sometimes illegible work. Students did not take time to focus on writing, so they were lacking the skills needed to advance in language arts, writing, and reading subjects. They did not have an adequate understanding of the genres of writing, structure of sentences, or mechanics of the written language. The teacher had not been able to build the motivation necessary in students to engage them in writing instruction and teach them the skills needed in future grade levels. The observations I made of the students’ lack of writing knowledge and motivation moved me to conduct this action research study.

In order to promote interest and motivation for writing in the classroom, I implemented the use of student to teacher dialogue journals. Dialogue journals were given to each student, and on a regular basis, students were encouraged to respond to an academic prompt or free write about their personal experiences for the teacher to read and respond. It was my aim that these journals would encourage students to write about topics in which they were interested, motivating them to add detail, unique craft, and effective structure to their work. The journals would provide students an opportunity to share their experiences and interests in a more casual way, while providing the teacher with a less formal tool for assessment. The dialogue journals could motivate students to do their best work and create their best writing, because they would be interested in what they were writing and eager to hear back from the teacher. The dialogue journals would allow the teacher to build the idea that writing is an enjoyable opportunity to express and create new ideas. In return, students would be more engaged in meaningful writing instruction as new writing skills are taught. Based on the problem identified, the following question guided my action research study, “How will the use of student to teacher dialogue journals impact my ability to teach writing skills?”
Review of Literature

What are Dialogue Journals?

Dialogue journals are traditionally a form of written communication between a student and a teacher or between a more proficient and a less proficient writer (Denne-Bolton, 2013; Grande, 2008). Teachers use dialogue journals to respond to students’ entries by asking questions, making comments, or responding to a question students may write (Peyton, 2000). Dialogue journals often provide a source for students to communicate without worrying about their paper being marked up with error corrections (Grande; Linnell, 2010). With a more relaxed, casual setting, dialogue journals often become natural motivators for students to write in the classroom. Many students are eager to express their ideas and thoughts using dialogue journals, because they provide a place for students to bring their outside lives into the classroom (Denne-Bolton, 2013). According to Sara Denne-Bolton students who used dialogue journals in a classroom study were motivated to write more because they knew their teacher would respond. Also, according to Marya Grande who conducted a study of students in her classroom writing in journals to their intern teacher, students are more enthusiastic about writing in dialogue journals because they know they will develop a relationship with the responder. Dialogue journals have also been proven to help students develop literacy skills by increasing the amount of language and writing exposure that students have with a more experienced writer. Dialogue journals provide extra opportunities for a teacher or successful writer to model appropriate writing skills for developing students (Grande; Peyton).

Logistics of using Dialogue Journals

A key to implementing successful dialogue journals is to use them on a routine basis. Marya Grande (2008) found that students became more excited to participate in writing in journals if they received responses more frequently. She states that dialogue journals are most effective when the communication happens on a regular basis. Although the frequency of the use of dialogue journals depends heavily on the teacher’s schedule, the students’ needs, and the time frame, it is crucial that dialogue journals are implemented on a regular basis so that students do not lose interest (Peyton, 2000).

Another component of writing journals that teachers or proficient writers must consider is the materials required. Some teachers may choose to use paper-bound notebooks to allow the students to write. Others, however, may decide to implement electronic journals through email or another messaging system (Peyton, 2000). Some people suggest using email as the journaling tool in order to provide more frequent feedback. Teachers or supervisors who choose to implement dialogue journals electronically are able to respond to entries on a more regular basis, sometimes multiple times a week (Grande, 2008).

Topics for dialogue journals vary between situations and must be thoughtfully considered. The student may have the opportunity to choose a topic, or the teacher may select a topic that relates to the class curriculum or goals (Linnell, 2010). According to Peyton (2000), a teacher selecting a specific topic for students to write about may enhance the curriculum, but the primary goal of
dialogue journals should always be effective communication. In a study conducted using dialogue journals with two students exhibiting behavior problem, an observer recorded that a student was more likely to respond when asked a question relating to his interests (Anderson, Nelson, Richardson, Webb, Young, 2011). Dialogue journals are often an effective tool for minimizing writer’s block, because they allow students to write for fun, to experiment with writing topics, and to explore and communicate anything they find interesting (Denne-Bolton, 2013). Ultimately, it is proven that students are willing to write more if they write about topics that they select themselves (Grande, 2008).

**Should Dialogue Journals Contain Feedback?**

Dialogue journals should always contain a response from a teacher or more proficient writer. The teacher or more proficient writer might respond to a journal entry with specific praise, a few questions for the student to answer, or a request that the student should perform (Anderson, et. al., 2011). A responder’s prompts should be gentle, and may be in the form of a question asking for clarification, a comment on striking statements, or a paraphrase of important details that a student states (Denne-Bolton, 2013). There are arguments both for and against providing corrective feedback in dialogue journals. Grande (2008) believes dialogue journals are typically designed to be free of corrections, and she even encourages participants to refrain from making corrections in students’ journals. Some teachers find dialogue journals to be extremely beneficial in improving students’ writing structure and form. Dialogue journals provide a unique opportunity for teachers to highlight errors that students make in their writing, and if teachers can make these corrections without ruining the authenticity of the communication, dialogue journals can be an effective feedback tool. Some believe that the only way to utilize dialogue journals in their most beneficial form is to provide some form of corrective feedback through the entries. If teachers or proficient writers decide to provide corrective feedback through the journals, they must be careful to make the corrections natural in the conversation. Responders can provide natural corrective feedback by asking for confirmation or clarification on an unclear statement (Linnell, 2010).

**Benefits of using Dialogue Journals**

Dialogue journals are effective because they allow the teacher or more proficient writer to get to know students through one-on-one communication. In today’s classroom, it is difficult for teachers to find time to spend with each individual student, so dialogue journals provide a tool for teachers to build personal ties with each student (Peyton, 2000). Students feel important when they are given the opportunity to communicate with the teacher on a one-on-one basis. In one study, researchers found that students typically feel more supported when their teacher makes an effort to know them on a personal level (Anderson, et. al., 2011). They feel as if they are being heard and that their contribution has an important role in the class. Stronger relationships with students also improve a teacher’s ability to prepare lessons that meet their students’ needs by having a deeper understanding of each student’s strengths and weaknesses (Denne-Bolton, 2013; Peyton). Grande (2008) claims that a stronger bond with students on a personal level allows the teacher to incorporate their interests into instruction and content, which
results in more easily motivated students. She also concludes that a personal bond with students creates trust between the teacher and student so that each child feels valuable and important.

Stronger teacher-student relationships improve student behavior, and the deeper one-on-one relationships that dialogue journals provide for students and teachers are an effective tool to support academic development, social skills, and positive behavior (Anderson, et. al., 2011; Denne-Bolton, 2013). Not only do dialogue journals improve student behavior by creating stronger teacher-student relationships, but they also allow teachers to teach social skills through certain responses to student work. Dialogue journals allow teachers to model appropriate behaviors without embarrassing them in front of their peers. Teachers are able to respond to students’ actions and request new actions or different responses when a student encounters a similar situation in the future. According to studies, students seem to respond better to a teacher’s request for action when it is handled in a gentle way (Anderson, et. al.).

It is important to build writing confidence before students are expected to write strict academic papers, and dialogue journals can be an effective tool to boost students’ confidence in their writing skills. Dialogue journals allow students to become comfortable writing without the fear of being corrected or graded (Denne-Bolton, 2013). Dialogue journals also seem to improve student motivation to write. Students seem to appreciate the feedback from another person that they receive in dialogue journals, so they begin to enjoy writing and have an eager anticipation to share (Denne-Bolton). According to Peyton (2000), dialogue journals should make writing relaxing and enjoyable.

The use of dialogue journals builds students’ literacy skills by increasing the exposure they have to proper, academic writing (Grande, 2008). The additional opportunities for students to practice writing in a casual, comfortable setting also help to develop their writing abilities (Peyton, 2000). Stronger bonds between the teacher and student created from dialogue journals allow the teacher to prepare more meaningful lessons around content that the students find interesting, which seems to increase students’ opportunities to reach academic goals (Anderson, et. al., 2011). Also, if a teacher decides to use gentle, corrective feedback in dialogue journals, the journals can be an ideal springboard for literacy, writing, and language arts lessons. As long as a responder is not compromising the comfortable dialogue with the student, an instructor can use dialogue journals to teach strategies to develop student writing (Linnell, 2010).

Ultimately, as stated by Denne-Bolton (2013), dialogue journals provide frequent, regular writing opportunities for students to record their thoughts without fear and as if they are having a casual conversation with another person. This builds a strong relationship between the teacher and student, improves behavior issues, promotes confidence and enjoyment of writing, and can even help students develop academically (Anderson, et. al., 2011). As long as effective communication is the ultimate goal and purpose for implementing dialogue journals, they should be a beneficial tool and offer a positive writing experience (Linnell, 2010; Peyton, 2000).

Method

In hopes of improving student motivation and writing skills, I began using dialogue journals in early October and continued using them until mid-November. I used the dialogue journals in
writing and reading class. I decided to use dialogue journals because studies show that they are beneficial to build personal connections, individualize instruction to meet each student’s needs, and help develop writing abilities (Peyton, 2000). Students wrote in their journals twice each week, and I responded to each entry within at least two days. I was careful to use the dialogue journals on a regular basis, as research proves they are more motivating and most effective when communication is frequent (Grande, 2008). The writing journals were introduced as a way for students to write personal entries about their own lives, and about three weeks later, I introduced academic writing responses using the journals. My hope was to see improvement in students’ desire to write strong entries about academic topics as a result of their practice writing personal entries earlier in the journals. Some researchers suggest that dialogue journals provide an appropriate venue for academic language lessons as long as the communicative nature is not hindered (Linnell, 2010). I wanted to test this suggestion by having students respond to specific academic prompts once they were comfortable and engaged in using the dialogue journals. In an effort to motivate students and see improvement in their academic writing, I began using the dialogue journals during content lessons and responding to the entries with positive feedback.

My study focused specifically on five students in the class so that I could monitor their work and progress more closely. I selected a below-average student, two average level students, and two above-average students to specifically focus this study. I administered a motivation survey to these five students when I introduced the dialogue journals to gage how they felt about writing, what they believed were their writing strengths, and what they disliked about writing. At the end of the dialogue journal implementation, I administered the same survey to the five focal students to analyze their change in writing motivation. As research suggests, the feelings of value and appreciation that students receive when their teacher writes back to their journal entries motivates them to continue sharing (Denne-Bolton, 2013). At the end of the dialogue journal implementation, I compared the five students’ first entry to their last entry checking for spelling issues, punctuation issues, misused words and run on sentences. I counted the number of miscues in their work to gather data for the study.

**Timeline**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Plan of Action</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Days 1-2</td>
<td>Introduce the dialogue journals. Have students create a title page and write their first journal entry about their personal interests and talents. Administer the motivation survey to five focal students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Days 3-4</td>
<td>Collect a second writing sample about students’ personal lives, allowing them to write about anything they wish to share. Respond to entries students write and redistribute journals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Days 5-6</td>
<td>Collect a third writing sample about students’ personal lives, allowing them to write about any topic they would like but offering a prompt to write about the previous weekend. Respond to entries and redistribute journals.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Days 7-8</td>
<td>Introduce academic writing to dialogue journal process. Collect one writing sample on an academic topic, requiring students to respond to a prompt that coincides with an academic lesson. Respond to students’ entries and redistribute journals.</td>
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</table>
Days 9-10 | Collect a second academic writing sample that coincides with an academic lesson. Encourage students to use the instructions to organize their academic writing piece. Respond to entries and redistribute journals.

Days 11-12 | Collect final academic writing sample that coincides with an academic lesson. Also allow students to add additional entries about personal topics of their choice. Respond to entries and redistribute journals. Administer the final motivation survey to same five focal students.

Day 13 | Collect students’ journals to respond to any final entries. Collect data by comparing the first sample to the last sample and counting the number of miscues in both samples. Redistribute journals. Collect data by comparing first and last motivation survey.

Data Analysis

This study focused on five specific students from whom data were collected and writing improvement was analyzed. Student A, a below-average student, students B and C, both average level students, and students D and E, both above-average students each used the dialogue journals on two days over the course of six weeks. The first journal entry they wrote was based on a personal piece of writing focusing on their families, interests, and hobbies. The last piece of writing was an academic sample relating to poetry writing. I counted and compared the number of writing miscues in the first entry and the last entry to assess improvement of writing skills. Specifically, I looked for incorrect spelling, incorrect punctuation marks including commas and apostrophes, misused words or word tenses, and run-on or incomplete sentences. Table 1 shows the five focal students’ miscue counts in the first and last journal entries.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Miscues in First and Last Journal Entry</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student A (Below-Average)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student B (Average)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student C (Average)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student D (Above-Average)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student E (Above-Average)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1 shows the data in a bar graph to better compare writing miscues between the first and last journal entries for the five focal students.

![Bar graph showing writing miscues on first and last entries.]

**Figure 1.** Writing miscues on first and last entries.

Table 2 indicates students’ responses to some of the writing survey items before the dialogue journals and after the dialogue journals were implemented.
Table 2

Writing Motivation survey Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Writing Feelings Before Journals</th>
<th>Writing Feelings After Journals</th>
<th>Writing Types Before Journals</th>
<th>Writing Types After Journals</th>
<th>Writing Strengths Before Journals</th>
<th>Writing Strengths After Journals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>I love writing.</td>
<td>I love writing.</td>
<td>Narrative, Expository</td>
<td>Narrative, Expository</td>
<td>Ideas, Interesting stories, Spelling</td>
<td>Ideas, Organization, Transition words, Interesting stories, Capitalization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Writing is okay.</td>
<td>I love writing.</td>
<td>Expository</td>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>Handwriting</td>
<td>Handwriting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>I love writing.</td>
<td>I love writing.</td>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>Interesting stories</td>
<td>Interesting stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Writing is okay.</td>
<td>I love writing.</td>
<td>Narrative, Expository, Poetry</td>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>Ideas, Details, Interesting stories, Word choice, Spelling, Handwriting, Capitalization</td>
<td>Organization, Punctuation, Interesting stories, Word choice, Handwriting, Capitalization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>I love writing.</td>
<td>I love writing.</td>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>Ideas, Details, Interesting stories, Spelling, Handwriting</td>
<td>Ideas, Details, Organization, Punctuation, Interesting stories, Spelling, Handwriting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1 and Table 2 detail the data collected in regards to the number of miscues in the students’ writing, revealing that each student showed improvement in writing skills except student A, the below-average student. The other four students improved by having a fewer number of miscues in their last journal entry than in their first entry. Upon reviewing the below-average student’s last entry, it appears that she had a greater number of miscues in her writing because her sentences were longer and contained more words. The two average-level students decreased in the number of miscues by smaller increments, but the above-average students decreased in their number of miscues almost completely. One student had one miscue and the other student had two miscues in the final journal entry.

The student motivation data indicates that each of the students either continued in their interest in writing or grew from thinking writing is just okay to enjoying writing. The motivation surveys also showed that most of the students seemed to feel strong in either the same elements of writing or more elements of writing by the end of the dialogue journal process. These results show the students’ increase in writing confidence over the six weeks in which we used the dialogue journals. Most of the students’ writing genre preferences stayed the same or increased in the number of genres in which they enjoyed writing. However, student D only indicated enjoying narrative writing on the last survey instead of all three genres as she did on the first survey. Also, student B’s response changed from liking expository writing on the first survey to
enjoying narrative writing on the second survey. All five students indicated an enjoyment of narrative writing on the last motivation survey.

Figure 2 shows images of several students’ first and last journal entries and also images of several students’ writing motivation surveys.
I have 1 sister, a mom and a dad. My mom is looking for a job. My dad works offshore in New Orleans. My sister is in 1st grade and is 6 years old. I'm in 4th grade and I'm 10 years old.

I like gymnastics and playing basketball. I go to gymnastics at Tumbling Tides and I play basketball with my cousins.

My favorite school subject is Math and Reading. Because, we have fun in both of them and I like reading because we watch TV and listen to stories. I like math because we have fun doing work and we get in centers.

Your dad has a cool job.

Poetry...
- Shape poems
- Brainstorm
- Curculits
- Candy
- Popcicles
- Rhymes
- Put on paper
- Put on computer

Snickers are chewy, sticky, delicious, bumpy, chocolatey, short, and nice to eat. Snickers can be a great thing to eat when you want candy. They are one of my favorite candies. They put smiles on peoples’ faces.
Figure 2. Images of students’ writing and motivation surveys
Conclusions

After studying the results of my action research, I conclude that teacher to student dialogue journals can influence students’ motivation to write and also impact students’ writing skills. Teacher to student dialogue journals seem to be an effective tool to help encourage students to write and to write with better form. After viewing the first and last writing samples from all five focal students, I see improvement in the students’ use of proper punctuation, correct spelling, and appropriate sentence formation. The only student who did not show improvement in the mechanics of her writing was the below-average student. Even though she did not show improvement in the actual form of her writing, her last writing entry contained longer, more thoughtful sentences with more complex words. The depth of her last entry seems to be the reason for her greater number of miscues in writing form. Since all of the other students have fewer miscues in their final entry compared to their first entry, I conclude that the dialogue journals were an effective tool to help improve students’ writing skills.

Based on the writing motivation surveys administered at the beginning and end of this study, the dialogue journals also impacted students’ motivation to write in a positive way. On the last writing survey, every student checked the box indicating that they love to write. Also, three of the five focal students indicated more areas of writing strengths on the final writing survey than they did on the first survey. This leads me to believe that the dialogue journals have helped students to become more confident writers who actually enjoy the writing process.

The teacher to student dialogue journals provided more practice and opportunities for students to engage in the writing process. They also encouraged students to write thoughtful entries, because they knew they were going to receive quick feedback. I was impressed by the magnitude of the results and how almost all of the students that I studied improved in their writing skills by the end of the journal process. I was pleased with how the dialogue journals influenced students’ writing skills and writing motivation and I would use this method again in another classroom to help improve students’ writing skills.

Now that I have conducted this study, I hope to use the teacher to student dialogue journal method in my future classroom. I have seen positive impacts on student writing based on the influence and practice the dialogue journals provided, so, I would like to implement them in a classroom for an entire year. In this study, I only had six weeks to allow students to write in the journals and they had a positive effect. Therefore, I believe the use of dialogue journals throughout an entire year might be even more influential. The dialogue journals between students and parents or between students and older peers might be another beneficial approach to the dialogue journal process. If I am able to implement teacher to student dialogue journals in my classroom for an entire year, as I hope, I would like to try allowing students to write to other more proficient writers.

This methodology appears to help build student motivation to write and students’ writing skills. The use of the journals over a longer period of time and possibly between students and other more developed writers should be investigated. Dialogue journals between students and more
proficient writers provide students with engaging practice opportunities, which help to improve their writing form and their writing motivation.

References


