BECOMING BOOK BUDDIES: WRITING DIALOGUE JOURNALS IN A FIRST GRADE CLASSROOM

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Children are very successful natural language learners. Before entering school, they develop significant oral language proficiency through natural spoken conversation, as well as a myriad of strategies for decoding and encoding print through real-life reading and writing experiences. Once in school, however, instead of engaging in self-selected learning opportunities as they have in the past, children are required to practice traditional decontextualized reading and writing tasks. Often, these tasks are unfamiliar, confusing, and frustrating to children because they don't build on their prior knowledge, personal experience, or current ways of knowing about the social world. We believe this situation can be avoided by creating classroom contexts and utilizing instructional strategies which support and extend the natural language learning proficiencies children bring with them to school.

The research reported here explores first-graders' written responses to literature in dialogue journals, an instructional activity that has the potential to create situations in classrooms for these things to happen. According to Staton (1988), dialogue journals are interactive written conversations about self-generated topics of interest, and occur between student and teacher frequently and continuously over an extended period of time. They are used by

teachers to initiate students into intentional, real-life uses of written language, to create understanding and rapport between students and themselves, and to engage students in extending their thinking processes (Staton, 1985; Kreeft Peyton, 1987; Staton, et. al. 1988).

PAST RESEARCH

In the past, research studies on dialogue journals have explored student written conversations about topics of personal interest (Staton, Shuy, Kreeft Peyton, Reed, 1988), but little attention has focused specifically on written response to literature. Other studies have focused on literature, but have been concerned with the analysis of verbal response rather than the written (Galda, 1982; Applebee, 1978; see Dillard, 1987). In this study dialogue journals were referred to as "Lit Logs" and engaged participants in written conversations about books. This study explores student and teacher response to self-selected pieces of literature through dialogue journal writing.

Some studies have viewed dialogue journals as an instructional strategy in an effort to explore the development of discrete literacy skills such as spelling, punctuation, and writing improvement (Staton, 1985). This line of research has proven somewhat limited because it treats dialogue journal writing as a decontextualized practice rather than a complex strategy deeply embedded in the social context in which it occurs (Staton, 1987).

Recent research, however, has recognized the context-specific nature of dialogue journal writing by viewing it in relation to other factors such as teacher goals, personal growth and development, student needs and intentions, personal and academic problem-solving, metalinguistic awareness, and social context. This recognition has broadened research interest in dialogue journals to include both student learning and teacher learning (Roderick and Berman, 1984). Special efforts were taken to capture the context of the teaching-learning environment in the first grade classroom where this study took place. The ongoing back and forth construction of written responses between student and teacher became a window for observing and tracing student learning. In a similar way, it was a mirror for better understanding and deeper reflection on teaching processes (See Bintz, 1989; Dillard, 1989).

Two questions guided this inquiry: (1) What functions do stu-

dent and teacher response to literature serve?, and (2) What patterns of student response to literature develop over time?

DATA-COLLECTION

This study took place in a first-grade classroom located in a suburban school district near a large midwestern city. Participants included one researcher (Bintz), one teacher-researcher (Dillard, who worked as a reading-writing consultant in the school district), one experienced first-grade teacher (Martin), and a total of 25 heterogeneously-mixed first-graders. All data were collected by the teacher-researcher during the second semester of one school year. Methods included participant observation, recording fieldnotes, collection of writing samples, and audio and video recording of teacher-student verbal interactions.

At the beginning students received journal booklets made of primary lined paper with wallpaper covers. A letter inside invited them to write to the teacher about any book they were reading at the time. It was explained that the teacher would read each entry and write back, and in this way they could continue to write to each other about books for the remainder of the year. After this introduction, dialogue journal writing occurred on the average of once every two weeks for approximately 30 minutes in a period set aside for the activity.

During these sessions, the teacher-researcher collected data. In an effort to capture the context, she carried a tape recorder with her as she went from student to student. This proved somewhat inadequate because data were consisting primarily of student oral readings. Later, the teacher-researcher placed a tape recorder on each set of tables where students were sitting. This procedure was soon abandoned, however, when the presence of the tape recorders began changing the social context the activity had originally been inciting. Some students no longer chatted to their neighbors, while others' voices competed for the tape recorder. Finally, the teacher-researcher opted to respond to individual students out in the hall as a means of recording the kind of student/teacher interaction taking place inside the "lit log" activity.

DATA-ANALYSIS

Complete student journals were photocopied for writing samples. Of these, six student journals were selected for analysis.

These were predicted to be highly insightful and generative since these students enjoyed reading and writing. The six chosen were selected to provide potentially maximum contrasts in the data analyses. Three journals were from males and three from females. Two journals were selected from low ability and two from high ability students with respect to reading and writing based on informal assessments conducted by the teacher and teacher-researcher during the first semester.

Each research question in this study involved different methods of analysis. To answer the first question, "What functions did student and teacher response to literature serve?," data-analysis involved taking into account recent research that indicates students and teachers utilize a wide variety of language functions in dialogue journal writing (Staton, 1985; Roser and Martinez, 1985; Atwell, 1987; Roderick and Berman, 1984; Gambrell, 1985; Hickman, 1984) and examining reader response in terms of the specific functions they served.

This research as well as the work of Shuy guided the analysis. Shuy argues that functional language analysis is a viable alternative to more orthodox ways of studying writing. Traditionally, surface level features such as spelling, grammar, punctuation, and cohesion are used to analyze writing. Shuy, however, provides a model of analysis which attempts to look beneath the surface features of language in order to explore the deeper structure of language functions. He suggests that by examining writing in terms of language functions, the extent students possess the ability to use language to solve their problems and accomplish their goals can be more accurately determined.

To answer the second question, "What patterns of student response to literature developed over time?," data-analysis involved a three-step process. In step one, the researcher read through the six journals non-stop, making no notes and spending little time seriously reflecting on what was being read. At this time the intent was simply to generate some preliminary feelings for who these students were and for how they were responding to literature. In step two, the researcher read through the journals again, only this time reading more critically and reflectively. The intent here was to begin constructing emerging patterns and working hypotheses from the data. All patterns and hypotheses were subsequently written on separate "post-its." This strategy allowed for rearrangement, addition, and deletion of categories as data-analysis

progressed. Later, the researcher focused on refining patterns and hypotheses by constantly comparing them against the data (Glasser and Strauss, 1967).

FINDINGS

READER RESPONSE FUNCTIONS

For this study we tried to create a classroom context where students and teachers could use dialogue journals as a functional tool for generating and sharing written responses to literature. We were particularly interested in exploring what specific language functions these written responses served.

To that end, following Shuy's procedure for analyzing functional language competence discussed above, every sentence written in each dialogue journal was categorized according to its function in the entry. Each of the following categories was constructed from the data, and defines, identifies, and evidences a specific reader response function (NOTE: S = Student response, and T = Teacher response).

1. REPORTING GENERAL FACTS: Response, not related to the self or to the author, identifying a general fact about a book.

   S. The title of my book is Little Lost Dinosaur.

   T. Non-fiction means real.

2. REPORTING PERSONAL FACTS: Response personally related to the self.

   S. I'm reading this book because I have it at home.

   T. I am learning how to do wallpapering from a book I am reading.

3. ASKING QUESTIONS: Responses in the form of questions requesting information, procedure, and opinion.

INFORMATION

   S. Do you have any Berenstein books?

   T. That book had a funny twist to it. Can you remember what it was?

PROCEDURE

   S. What do you do when it's time for school?

   T. How did the author tell you that the kid was a college kid?

OPINION

    S. I think the picture is funny. Do you think it is?

    T. Is it a scary book?

4. RESPONDING TO QUESTIONS: Response which immediately follows an entry that asks a question. Response indicated a topic shift, a topic identification, or a topic elaboration. Topic shift responses were those that did not provide an explicit answer(s) to the question(s) asked in the previous entry, but rather indicated a shift in topic. Topic identification responses were those that did provide an explicit and, most often, literal answer(s) to the question(s). Topic elaboration responses were those that did provide not only direct and literal answer(s) to the previous question(s), but also went beyond the question and initiated a new topic altogether.

A. TOPIC SHIFT (STUDENT)

    T. I know that book Pierre too. It rhymes all the way through. Actually, I agree with your idea to change the ending to say, 'I do care.' I wonder why the author didn't think of that! Lexie told me that she read Pierre too. That makes 3 of us. I wonder if she liked the ending?

    S. I have a book that's all about kids who say stupid things, and I think this book is funny and if you read it you might think it is funny, too.

TOPIC SHIFT (TEACHER)

    S. I asked my mom if I can get some Shel Silverstein books. I think they are funny, do you?

    T. I hope your wish comes true and your mom buys you the Silverstein books. If you have a tape recorder, I will let you borrow my Shel Silverstein tapes.

B. TOPIC IDENTIFICATION (STUDENT)

    T. I like your story. Which one is the funniest character?

    S. Pepper.

TOPIC IDENTIFICATION (TEACHER)

    S. I think you are right. The picture is funny. Do you think it is?

    T. Yes, I think the picture is funny, too.

C. TOPIC ELABORATION (STUDENT)

T. I like your lit note. What kind of book are you going to get next?

S. A hard book with hard words. I hope I can have that book a long time.

TOPIC ELABORATION (TEACHER)

S. My sister has the book A Light In The Attic. Do you?

T. Yes! I have four of them because lots of kids like to read it. I don't want to be left without a copy. Why don't you write Sara or Jane about Shel Silverstein?

5. CONFIRM/AFFIRM: Response indicating a sense of confirmation and affirmation, a sense of mutuality between teacher and student experience.

S. Yes, that happened to me too.

T. I like passing notes with you a lot. P.S. We are best friends.

6. PREDICTION: Response indicating that something will happen in the future.

S. I think you would like the book too.

T. I think the penguins will have to go to the zoo at the end.

7. EVALUATION: Response indicating personal judgment or assessment of a book or particular aspect of a book.

S. I have a dumb book because it doesn't tell about anything.

T. The Dennis the Menace book was a riot.

8. REACT/COMMENT: Response indicating an observation about a book.

S. I laughed my head off at this book.

T. I'm glad you enjoyed the book.

9. INVITING/SUGGESTING: Response indicating an invitation to start and/or continue reading and writing about a book(s).

S. I will bring a Berenstein book in for you.

T. HI! I hope you will write me about the book you are reading.

10. REFLECTING: Response indicating reader reflection about a book.

S. I bet you were just like him in the story.

T. I remember when my mother used to read stories to me.

Table 1 illustrates how students responded to teachers, and how teachers responded to students in terms of reader response functions. It is clear that, unlike the teacher who spent little time responding to students by reporting information (12%), students dominated the reporting function, spending almost 50% of their time reporting general (30.5%) and personal facts (18.0%). In fact, reporting general facts accounted for almost 1 out of every 3 student responses.

Moreover, within the personal reporting function itself, the three female students seemed to be more personally engaged in the writing than did the three boys. The girls spent 47% of their time reporting general facts to 54% reporting personal facts, compared to the boys who spent 75% of their time writing general facts and only 18% on personal facts. Ben and Bob in particular appeared not to be personally engaged in the writing considering that Ben reported only 1 personal fact, and Bob only 6.

A lack of personal engagement by students is somewhat understandable since, outside of the reporting function, students spent considerable time answering teacher questions. In fact, because the teacher/teacher researcher spent almost 40% of their time asking questions, one out of every 5 student responses functioned as a response to teacher/teacher researcher questions. Most of these questions were specific requests for information (25.6%). Second most were requests for opinions (10.7%), followed to a much lesser extent by requests for procedures (2.2%). This 40% question-asking figure becomes even more significant when we see that students only spent 2% of their time asking questions of the teacher/teacher researcher. In fact, of the 8 total questions students generated, the girls, specifically Jane and Sara, asked 7 and the boys asked only 1.

Overall, students spent over 90% of their time using primarily four response functions: Reporting (48.5), Responding (20.8), Reacting/Commenting (13.5), and Evaluating (9.5). The teacher, on the other hand, spent approximately 85% of her time using five response functions: Questioning (38.6), Reacting/Commenting (12.0), Reporting (11.9), Evaluating (11.4), and Suggesting/Inviting (11.0). Students and the teacher overlapped to a significant

TABLE 1

TOTALS OF STUDENT RESPONSE FUNCTIONS

	Reporting		Questioning	Topic			Responding		Topic		Confirm			React	Suggest		
	Gen	Per	Ques Totals	Inf	Proc	Op	Resp Totals	Shift	ID	Elab	Affirm	Pred	Eval	Comment	Invite	Ref	TOTALS
Ben	22	1	(0)	0	0	0	(17)	4	11	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	42
Tom	22	11	(1)	0	1	0	(17)	7	6	4	0	0	5	15	0	0	71
Jane	13	18	(2)	2	0	0	(15)	5	2	8	3	2	6	8	2	0	69
Sara	15	11	(5)	2	0	3	(12)	2	7	3	5	0	14	6	0	0	68
Sue	19	25	(0)	0	0	0	(9)	4	2	3	1	1	5	14	2	0	76
Bob	31	6	(0)	0	0	0	(13)	5	5	3	0	6	6	11	0	0	73
TOTALS	122	72	(8)	4	1	3	(83)	27	33	23	9	9	38	54	4	0	399
%	30.5	18.0	(2.0)	1.0	0.25	0.75	(20.8)	6.7	8.2	5.7	2.2	2.2	9.5	13.5	1.0	0	

TOTALS OF TEACHER RESPONSE FUNCTIONS

	Reporting		Questioning	Topic			Responding		Topic		Confirm			React	Suggest		
	Gen	Per	Ques Totals	Inf	Proc	Op	Resp Totals	Shift	ID	Elab	Affirm	Pred	Eval	Comment	Invite	Ref	TOTALS
Ben	0	2	(21)	17	0	4	(0)	0	0	0	1	0	4	2	4	0	34
Tom	4	3	(22)	15	1	6	(1)	0	0	1	4	0	4	8	9	1	56
Jane	0	8	(24)	18	2	4	(2)	1	0	1	2	4	7	3	6	0	56
Sara	3	3	(18)	9	1	8	(5)	2	0	3	6	3	9	9	6	1	63
Sue	2	3	(17)	11	0	6	(0)	0	0	0	7	3	6	4	6	1	49
Bob	7	3	(20)	11	3	6	(0)	0	0	0	3	0	6	12	4	3	58
TOTALS	16	22	(122)	81	7	34	(8)	3	0	5	23	10	36	38	35	6	316
%	5.0	6.9	(38.6)	25.6	2.2	10.7	(2.5)	.9	0	1.5	7.2	3.2	11.4	12.0	11.0	1.8	

degree only across three functions: Reporting, Reacting/Commenting, and Evaluating. They differed in that students used Responding approximately 20% of the time whereas the teacher used Responding only 2.5% of the time, and conversely the teacher used Questioning approximately 40% of the time whereas students used Questioning only 2% of the time.

PATTERNS OF WRITTEN RESPONSE TO LITERATURE

In addition to exploring reader response functions, we were also interested in examining to what extent specific patterns of student response to literature developed over time. Several salient patterns emerged from the data. These patterns can best be illustrated by using a continuum (see Figure 1). In the beginning student response focused on identifying and communicating discrete pieces of information. Students, for instance, identified such things as the title of their book, the name of a major character, and a reason for selecting or liking a particular book ("I'm reading this book because I have it at home."). Early on, students spent most of their time simply naming, labeling, and identifying specific aspects of books.

FIGURE 1

Character/Title	Evaluating Book/ Title/Characters Making Connections	Predicting

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22

Character/Action/Result Refering to Writing	Inviting
Lesson from Book	Sharing
Consequence of Lesson	Recommending
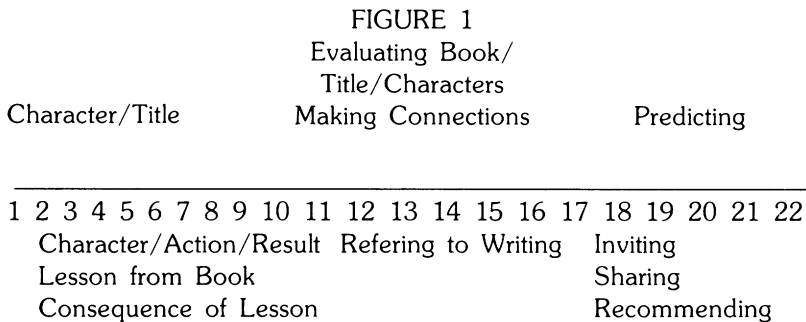
As the semester progressed, student responses began to reflect attention to such things as situating characters within action scenes ("I think the penguins will have to go to the zoo at the end."); remarking about particular lessons learned ("I didn't get any of the words wrong in this book."); evaluating books, titles of books, and book characters ("I have a great book for book chats today."); and making connections to other books ("This book is like The Berenstein Bears.") By the end of the semester student response progressed to making predictions about story lines ("I thought that Poofy was going to chase the little girl in the house and get into

trouble.") and sharing recommendations to peers about specific books ("I think you'd really like this book."). At this point, students were spending most of their time not on identifying particular aspects of books, but on exploring, evaluating, and recommendating books as a whole.

We also detected another pattern which, perhaps, is important to include here. This pattern indicated a significant degree of erraticism in both student and teacher writing over time. This erraticism can best be described as a series of peaks and valleys in the actual amount of writing produced.

Although many other factors were undoubtedly at work, we suspect that these peaks and valleys had something to do with the nature of teacher prompts. For example, valleys in writing, that is, instances when students wrote very little, most often occurred when teacher prompts took the form of a personal fact followed by a closed-ended question or invitation.

T. I like your story. Which one is the funniest character?

S. Pepper.

T. That sounds like a good book. Halloween is just about my favorite holiday. Is it a scary book?

S. My book is not scary and I like it alot.

On the other hand, peaks in writing, that is, instances when students wrote a great deal, most often occurred when teacher prompts took the form of a personal fact followed by an open-ended question, invitation, or suggestion.

T. I love book chats. Tell me something about your book.

S. My book chat is called Pierre. All he would say was I don't care. If I were Pierre, I would say I do care at the end. It was good because at the end he said I do care. And not only Pierre was in the story, a lion was in the story too. He ate Pierre up and when the lion ate Pierre, the lion dropped down to the ground and when the parents came home they said Pierre was surely dead and they rushed the lion to the doctor and the doctor shook the lion up and down and Pierre dropped out of the lion's mouth.

It is interesting to note that this pattern held true for student prompts as well. For instance, when student prompts took the form of personal statements followed by close-ended comments,

the teacher wrote very little, most often responding succinctly to the comment and then stopping abruptly.

In other instances, however, the teacher coped with prompts that appeared to leave little room for open-ended conversation by elaborating or shifting the topic, and by using language functions such as inviting, commenting, and confirming in an apparent attempt to keep the dialogue going.

S. My sister has the book A Light In The Attic. Do you?

T. Yes! I have four of them because lots of kids like to read it. I would not want to be without a copy. Why don't you write Sara or Jane about Shel Silverstein?

DISCUSSION

We set out to explore the efficacy of using dialogue journals as an instructional tool for learning more about how teachers and students can talk about books with each other. We have learned much from this research, not only about students as readers and writers, but also about ourselves as teachers and researchers.

We have learned, for instance, that writing dialogue journals about self-selected pieces of literature offers teachers and students a potential for using a wide variety of reader response functions. This potential is important because, as Barnes notes, successful classroom learning requires that individuals use a wide variety of language functions ranging from exploration to exposition. In this study, the students and the teacher utilized that potential by using a significant amount of total reader response functions (399 and 316 respectively). In fact, the students, as a group and as individuals (except for Ben), used more reader response functions (399 to 316) than did the teacher.

One caveat, however, is in order. Although total teacher response functions was significant, some functions were disproportionately used. Teacher questioning, for instance, was used so extensively, particularly with respect to eliciting specific information from students, that it appeared to overshadow all other reader response functions. We suspect that this overemphasis, although unintended, contributed to students' perceiving the teacher's role in writing dialogue journals as one of interrogator, whose closed-ended questions called for declarative, "final draft" answers (Barnes, 1976), rather than as an inquirer whose open-ended questions were invitations for continued exploration and reflection. This is

something the teacher and teacher researcher observed in the midst of the study (Dillard, 1989). They saw the students' responses cloning their questions and decided to see what would happen if they responded with open-ended rather than closed questions. They discovered the first graders had their own ideas about books and, once free from the directed questions, expressed what mattered to them.

This suspicion about the overemphasis on teacher questioning challenges us, as teachers, to demonstrate to students that the ultimate purpose of asking questions is not only for finding answers, but also for generating more and better questions. We believe this can be accomplished by engaging students in activities where they spend less time answering teacher questions and more time asking their own. For this to occur, greater attention needs to be directed to the types of prompts teachers and students provide each other when they engage in dialogue journal writing.

We have also learned that reflection is a powerful learning potential for analyzing dialogue journals. It was reflection that enabled us to generate hypotheses about relationships between student and teacher responses. One hypothesis is that teacher response in terms of the type of writing directed to different students in this study was to some extent influenced by the teacher's and teacher-researcher's initial predictions of student reading and writing abilities. We believe that these types of predictions are not necessarily trustworthy, and, indeed, have potential deleterious implications particularly for those students assumed to be of low-ability. In this instance, both the teacher and the teacher-researcher agreed that these particular students need ample encouragement, support, and practice with writing. Yet, ironically, in the end it was exactly these predicted low-ability students who wrote the least and were written to the least with respect to actual amounts of writing produced. Thus, the students who needed to benefit most from this activity perhaps benefitted the least.

We have also learned that writing dialogue journals is instrumental in teachers and students becoming book buddies in the classroom. Becoming a book buddy, however, is not a label or status, but a process of inquiry that evolves over time. Central to this process is the willingness on the part of teachers and students to be co-learners and to give of themselves by making their own learning vulnerable. Teachers particularly must be committed to establishing relationships with students that are not hierarchial and

authoritative, but collaborative and reciprocal. Students and teachers can become real book buddies only when they use reading and writing to hear each others' voices so that they can better hear their own.

In this instance, development of a meaningful book buddy relationship was somewhat impeded due to the fact that much of the dialogue at times appeared to resemble an interview more than a conversation. A fairly tight, but unintentional, scaffolding of the dialogue seemed to exist which suggested that the writing dialogue journals was being used by the teacher and perceived by the students as an instructional device rather than as a learning tool. In retrospect, we suspect that restricting writing in dialogue journals to predetermined 30-minute time slots, as was done in this study, is counter-productive. Rather, more time to read books and to write about books should be planned, so that individuals can more deeply experience not only reading and writing about a wide variety of books, but also reflecting on and sharing those books and that writing with others throughout the day.

Finally, we have learned from first-graders the value of risk-taking in learning. Initially, we set out to experiment with dialogue journals because we regarded the activity as an innovative teaching tool. We specifically hoped the use of dialogue journals would send lots of positive messages to students about reading and writing. We are convinced that it did. For instance, at the beginning students often read alone and talked about singular aspects of their book primarily with the teacher. And yet, as time went on, students began to engage in shared reading experiences and talk about connections between books with the teacher and with each other. We believe this was an important shift in helping students begin to see reading and writing less as isolated, individual activities and more as interrelated social engagements.

Only later, however, while analyzing transcripts of conversations between teachers and students, did we realize that the activity was much more than a teaching tool; it was a learning tool as well. Specifically, it allowed us to take a reflexive stance on our own learning as teachers and researchers. It was an opportunity to take a step away and look back on ourselves to see what we did in this study, what we're doing now, and where our current understandings of dialogue journals might be heading.

As a result, we now understand that an interest in dialogue journals is really an interest in learning. And, it is this shared in-

terest in learning, coupled with the willingness and ability of learners to read, write, share, and reflect with other learners, that ultimately defines what it means for teachers and students to become real book buddies in the classroom.

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