

## Responding in Journals

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### Abstract

This paper examines what happens if social interactions and cooperative learning are combined with writing. The paper focuses on the use of responding in journals to foster personal thought in connection to literature. Three journals are examined: response journals, dialogue journals, and double entry journals, with emphasis on dialogue journals. The affects and importance of journal writing is also discussed because these journals not only affect the students, but also the teacher. These affects can be found not only in the writing itself, but also in the relationships fostered between the teacher and his/her students. Guidelines and questions that facilitate use of the journals are also discussed. The information for this paper came from professional books and journals.

### Introduction

Over the years teachers have continuously searched for ways to improve upon student learning. Teachers and administrators have seldom agreed upon a common path to reach this goal. Three ideas however, with which most would agree: (1) student learning should be an ongoing process of related experiences; (2) students achieve when they are actively learning and relating experiences outside the classroom (Lapp, Flood & Farnam, 1989). One way teachers are achieving the above is through journal writing. Journal writing moves the student away from basic comprehension about what they are reading to an underlying understanding.

Responding in journals allows students to articulate connections between their prior knowledge and new knowledge better (Bruner, 1966). Students not only learn things through

verbal messages, but also through other means, such as math, music, written language, drama, and art (Vygotsky, 1962). Students also learn through different methods: reading, writing, speaking, and listening in which each helps students learn in a different way (Emig, 1977). If people write about the new information or ideas that they are learning in addition to discussions, reading, and listening, they learn and understand better (Britton, 1975).

Several different types of journals are available to the classroom teacher: diaries, learning logs, response journals, dialogue journals, and double entry journals. It will also be discussing the power of response.

## Social Constructivism

An individual derives meaning from situations through social constructivism, a process by which individuals combine his/her prior knowledge with his/her social interactions. This process includes interactions with friends, acquaintances, and community. No two people will ever interpret any situation in the same way because of the individuality of the process (Adams & Collins, 1985; Anderson, 1985; Graves, Watts-Taffe, & Graves, 1999; Mason, 1984; Rumelhart, 1984).

Social constructivism has influenced education in two ways. First, social constructivism is a motivating factor for small group work and cooperative learning. It is believed that much of what a student learns comes from their social interactions in the academic setting. Both small group work and cooperative learning allow for these social interactions to take place (Grave, Watts-Taffe & Graves, 1999). Second, social constructivism is the force beckoning teachers to use journal writing in response to reading literature (Graves, Watts-Taffe & Graves, 1999). Journal writing allows students to connect what they learn through social interactions in connections to course work. Also, interpersonal dialogue through writing is important because it introduces children,

especially elementary aged school-children, to the open, expressive uses of writing as a method of knowing oneself and one's world (Staton, 1987).

Journals give students, of any age, freedom within the classroom to express their own understanding of literary works in contrast to the teacher's understanding. Journals are notebooks with which students are allowed to record their personal thoughts about their reading or writing. These journals also allow students to develop consistency, fluency and confidence in their writing skills (Cooper, 2000). Journals help students make connections between reading and writing by combining the two, allowing students to construct their own meaning (Atwell, 1987; Harste et. Al., 1988; Parsons, 1990; Tierney et. al., 1990; Weaver, 1990a).

Educational theorists report that journals allow students to reflect personally upon cultural roles. These cultural roles are reflected upon through decision making and self-awareness within students' responses in their journals (Cothorn & Lyman, 1993). Journal writing also has the potential to combat cultural biases. Entries lead to an increased understanding of culture because they are complex and multifaceted. This is not only on the part of the student, but also one the part of the teacher. It leads teachers to better know and understand their students' richly configured and cultural personalities (Cothorn & Lyman, 1993). Claims have also been made that journals, through the mechanism of self-exploration and by having their voice heard, lead students to develop language processes and organizational skills, increase their ability to use prior knowledge, and as a result help create more positive attitudes toward literacy (Cothorn & Lyman, 1993; Staton, 1987).

Responding to literature is a direct or indirect result of reading, writing, or hearing (Cooper, 2000). All people respond in various ways to the things they read, write, or to which they listen. Responding is a part of the natural process of constructing meaning (Cooper, 2000). Each person's construction is personal and individual, existing between themselves and the text (Rosenbalt, 1938/1976, 1991). Since one's construction is personal, many acceptable responses can be made to a single piece of literature. According to reader response theory, interpreting literature should be a

personal thought process not directed by the teacher to a singular meaning (Cothorn & Lyman, 1993). Teachers should not force students to adopt their meaning of literature, but instead allow them the freedom to explore their prior knowledge in connection with literature and be prepared to accept and respect these individual responses from students.

### Why Respond?

Cooper (2000) suggests two types of responses to literature: personal and creative. Personal responses are those in which the student tells how they felt about what they read, including favorite parts or characters, and how what they read relates to their own lives. These are ways in which students respond to what they have read through some creative means other than writing such as art, music, and drama (Cooper, 2000).

Applebee (1978) suggests another way of looking at responses. He describes four types of responses, each reflecting a different thought process: retelling, summary, analysis, and generalizations. Retelling is simply recall of the text; summary is where events are retold in order of importance; analysis is where students respond personally to the text; and generalizations address the theme or main concept of the text (Applebee, 1978). These activities can be performed by even the youngest of students because even they are able to generalize or analyze to some degree (Many, 1991).

Over time as students practice different response methods their responses begin to develop patterns (Barone, 1990). These patterns are important because they signal growth in the students' development. According to Barone (1990) the patterns show growth in the students' analytical skills, questioning skills, the ability to form an opinion, and the increased ability to relate literature to personal experience. Equally important, responding allows teachers to witness these growths. Responding in journals provides teachers with information and allows for the evaluation, without grading, of how students are synthesizing and interpreting information. It also allows for the

teacher to evaluate whether or not the students can pick out the important information or the noteworthy information out of reading a piece of literature. Teachers can also use the journals to monitor and aid in students' writing development (Garcia, 1994). Teachers can gauge the above through the student engagement with the text and the world (Clery & Smith, 1993). By responding in journals teachers are able to assess on different levels. These levels include: telling the story; relating personal experiences or ideas to the text; evaluating the text; questioning the text; synthesizing ideas across the text; and predicting (Clery & Smith, 1993). The response is a dynamic approach to learning for students, not static like the mere regurgitation of facts or story line. The teacher is allowed to view her students as complex individuals capable of thinking and not as robots programmed to give back answer (Girioux, 1988).

Responding is very important for students' advancement. In response-centered classrooms students are allowed to develop a sense of ownership, pride and respect for their learning (Hansen, 1987). As a result students learn that their responses are valued and respected by other students and their teacher, regardless of their reading ability. Students, therefore, respond in a manner consistent with their own learning level (Cooper, 2000; Cothorn & Lyman, 1993; Kelly, 1990).

Responding in journals also helps students learn to monitor their own reading and writing. Continuous encouragement to respond to literature allows students to develop metacognitive processes. These processes are important while constructive meaning (Palincsar & Brown, 1986; Paris et. Al., 1991).

## Response Journals

Students use response journals to keep personal records about what they are reading. Personal reactions, questions, and reflections to what students read, write, or hear are incorporated into these journals. Students may include other information to be learned, such as vocabulary words they would like to learn, predictions, goals, and comments made during and after reading.

These journals can be used for both independent reading by students and/or for classroom reading assignments. Teachers may read these journals, however, they do not usually respond back to the students in them (Cooper, 2000). Response journals can also be referred to as reading journals or literary logs.

### Dialogue Journals

Dialogue journals operate under the same basic premise as response journals, but with an additional dimension. Dialogue journals incorporate the powerful dimension of dialogue through teachers' reading and responding to students' journal entries. Over time teachers and students are able to carry on evolving conversations through sharing ideas, feelings, and concerns in writing (Cooper, 2000; Staton, 1987). The input or guidance from the teacher also allows students to construct meaning more effectively.

"The major characteristics that distinguishes Dialogue Journals from other forms is the importance given to communication between the student and the teacher" (Tierney et. al. 1990, p. 97). Students must have knowledge, flexibility, and awareness in order to communicate effectively (Shanahan, 1988). Dialogue journals allow for these three variables. "The dialogue journal can help learners discover that both writing and reading require awareness of and collaboration with others, not merely putting words on paper in a vacuum or absorbing information that has magically appeared," (Barone, 1990, p. 364).

Dialogue journals, through a writing experience, allow the teacher to listen to the student (Staton, 1987). This listening allows the teachers to bear witness to the dynamic mind of the child. The teacher also enters into the mind and thought process of the child since dialogue journals are used on a daily basis, or at least a regular basis, over an extended period of time. Listening is also important for many students. Some may not be ready to write in their journals for themselves

without the support of a response back. It is important therefore they have an audience, or a teacher to write to and who will in return write back (Staton, 1987).

The dialogue journal is the most important type of journal for those students who are learning English as a second language and also for those students with a reading disability. These journals are places available to these students wherein spelling and appropriate use of language does not matter. Students, therefore, are able to communicate thoughts, ideas, feelings, and questions quickly without having to concentrate on grammar or spelling (Staton, 1987). Journals are also important because they allow these students to simply practice writing in a nontaxing way.

Dialogue journals for those who are learning English as a second language (ESL) can write either in English or in their native tongue, as long as the teacher knows their native language (Farnam, Flood & Lapp, 1994). Students are encouraged, however, to transition into using English in their journals. Dialogue journals have been found to be highly effective with ESL students leading to an increase in their writing, fluency, elaboration of topics, and use of conventional syntax (Kreeft & Shuy, 1985; Staton et. Al., 1998).

Dialogue journals lead to a better relationship between a teacher and his/her students because of the personal interactions between the two. By using dialogue journals teachers can also form new lesson plans. For example, "She (Leslee Reed) quickly found that the time she spent in responding was not only enjoyable, but that in the same hour she could do most of her lesson planning for the next day" (Staton, 1987, p. 51). Ms. Reed would use her student's responses and questions to her and create a meaningful lesson that the students could enjoy and learn from. This also led to the elimination of busy work and/or work sheets that had no meaningful purpose except to take up time (Staton, 1987).

Dialogue journals should not be seen as writing assignments, but as a means of open communication. Dialogue journals should not be assigned like homework, but should instead be available to students throughout the day. This allows students access to communicate thoughts throughout the day when the urge arises. Teachers need to respond to what the child is writing and

thinking and not how the child has written it. Students must also be assured that their journals are confidential and are not shared with anyone but the teacher and that child (Staton, 1987).

### Double Entry Journals

Double entry journals work under the same premise and are an extension of dialogue and response journals. Double entry journals are journals in which students not only respond personally to literature, but also take notes on the literature as well (Staton, 1987). Students divide the sheets of paper in their journals into two columns. On the left-hand side they make predictions, take notes, and create diagrams. These tasks take place before and during their reading. In the right hand column students are expected to record their personal responses to the literature. Double entry journals can also be used as dialogue journals between the students and the teacher. If this were to occur, teachers record their responses with the students in the right-hand column (Staton, 1987).

### Guidelines

Many guidelines should be followed if working with journals. First, it should be explained to the students that the journals are not either diaries or notebooks, but are extensions of each. For example, a student's personal response in his/her journal is a characteristic of a diary, while a written account of events from a book is a characteristic of a notebook. Second, the teacher needs to acknowledge the student's topic and encourage them through open-ended questions to elaborate upon their dialogue. Third, teachers need to support and compliment each student in their journal writing (Stanton, 1987). Teachers also need to participate in journal writing with their students so that students may see more value in the power of journal writing. Also, by sharing your journal writing, students will begin to feel more confident sharing their writings openly with the class.



Students should be allowed to or not to share their journal writings openly. Having students read their journal entries openly gives credibility and importance to activities that are not graded (Fulwiler, 1987). It is important to never force a student to share his/her journal openly.

### Open-ended questions

In addition to guideline above there are also questions teachers can ask that facilitate open-ended responses from their students. Cooper and Au (2000) suggest the following:

1. Does the story create a mood or feeling? What is the mood or feeling? How is it created?
2. What were your feelings as you read the story?
3. What are the main ideas in the story? What makes you think of them as you read the story?
4. Is this story similar to any of the other stories you have read? How so?
5. Are any of the characters similar to the characters you have read about in other stories?
6. Do you like one character more than another, why?
7. Is there any character more important than another? What makes him or her more important?

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Open-ended responses are important because they make students think beyond the written word that appears on the page. Students are able to reflect upon and gain an insight and understanding to literature through open-ended questions. Open-ended questions also foster personal responses from students. Students are encouraged to delve further into the story lines and characters of literary pieces, if there is a greater chance they will make connections between their own lives and the lives of characters. They may also begin making connections between events in a story and events in their own lives.

## Conclusion

Journals, if used appropriately, are powerful tools in regards to responding. They combine reading and writing in a way that no other literary tools do. They allow students to look beyond the simple comprehension of a literary text and move into a true understanding enabling them to communicate and question feelings, thoughts, and opinions on a higher level. Journals are not only used in primary and elementary schools, but are also used widely throughout high schools and colleges. Journals can be utilized effectively in many subjects outside of English, i.e. science, social studies, art, and music are but a few of the subjects in which journaling may be used effectively.

Journals offer many opportunities not only for educators, but also students. Educators and students alike can learn and reflect on cultural differences. This understanding leads to enhanced trust, mutual respect, and common liking between students and educators. Students can develop better writing skills without feeling pressure to perform perfectly. Ultimately, journal writing, at any age, fosters positive attitudes about both literacy and writing. The dynamic exploration of one's thought through the literary process and journaling should be celebrated and used throughout a person's schooling. Teachers need to not only open themselves up to their students, but also allow their students in. It is not until a teacher has made this connection to his/her students and has also allowed thinking to take place that learning has truly begun.

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