Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 24
Issue 1 *(Re)Vision*

Article 15

1-1-2008

"The Wondering Folder": Leading First Graders Toward Research

Cassandra L. Korinek
Cornerstone Elementary, Dexter, MI

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm

Recommended Citation
Korinek, Cassandra L. (2008) ""The Wondering Folder": Leading First Graders Toward Research," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 24: Iss. 1, Article 15.
Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1110

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

"The Wondering Folder": Leading First Graders Toward Research

Cassandra L. Korinek
Cornerstone Elementary
Dexter, MI

Beginning

Following a study of both the Michigan learning standards and the Michigan Genre Project, I was faced with guiding first grade children at Cornerstone Elementary School (in Dexter) to produce a non-fiction product that would incorporate informational writing and a research question. A lofty goal no doubt, and knowing what I've observed in my own classroom and what Lucy Calkins has expressed, how on earth was I going to help young children shine yet not lose sight of their treasures? In other words, how could I facilitate the children's writing endeavor in order to provide richness for inquiry and to encourage student choice? More importantly, how could the classroom environment encourage children to wonder and grow intellectually? As Calkins best put it, "our students' goal for their writing is not to inform but to share their fascination with a topic."

While pondering on this endeavor, I recalled a Debbie Miller workshop that I had attended. As I searched through my notes and materials, a resource that she introduced as a comprehension tool was unveiled. I toiled with it and transformed the tool into what I call a *wondering folder*. This new creation successfully guided my first graders towards becoming successful researchers of non-fiction texts. The approach developed from this tool supported my learners to take charge of their own investigation beyond the knowledge level. It helped them to invest in inquiry and to take their thinking to a much higher place. As you read on, the unit will unfold and the power of the *wondering folder* will become more apparent.

What Non-Fiction "Looks" Like

My first step was to think about what readers and composers of non-fiction "look" like. Asking this question helped me develop more clarity of what I needed to do to set the stage for the learners. Through observation, study, and interview, I wanted them to understand that *readers* of non-fiction may pick and choose several types of non-fiction materials to read from, that their drive for reading non-fiction is usually inquiry based, and that most proficient readers gather information systematically and purposefully. Similarly, *composers* of non-fiction have a desire to share in an organized way something in which they are an "expert." They are aware of different types of non-fiction text and use this knowledge to their advantage to find ways of informing their readers. Most importantly, composers of non-fiction text find the means to transfer their understanding in ways beyond the words printed on a report. This thought helped me to visualize the outcome of what I wanted my students to share—similar outcomes that Calkins discusses (cf. 431-32). From this valuable time I spent inquiring as a teacher, the framework of the unit began to take shape.

Preparing the Students through Exploration of Texts

My students dabbled in non-fiction text in kindergarten and in first grade. Through read-alouds, shared reading, independent reading, and guided reading, they studied non-fiction genres from these perspectives. With this in mind, I decided to evaluate my learners' understanding of non-fiction. Our school's fabulous librarian gathered four bins of non-fiction books that represented various styles. During a reader's workshop block, my children took part in a mini-lesson, fanned out and read a few books from the selection collected, and then returned to report findings. My lesson of the day was "never assume"! Although the students had many experiences with non-fiction, they needed independent time to explore it to become researchers. Through observing, many of them were reading cover-to-cover and had picked out topics to gather non-fiction evidence that was topic specific. Although they made a valiant effort, this was not what I was looking for.

Our second round with exploring non-fiction was quite different. The children browsed through several books, not all on the same topic. They noticed how non-fiction information was organized by various authors and for various topics. The children also questioned if information presented was true, particularly after reading books that resembled a "story" format. I believe that taking time to teach in an authentic way brings independence.

Presenting Writing as a "Big Picture" Through an Example Topic

Besides Calkins, my understanding of teaching writing has been influenced by the work of Katie Wood Ray. In her book *Study Driven*, she suggests that writing needs to be presented as big picture. Obviously parts of writing must be broken down and studied, but unless budding writers understand the big picture, clarity of how the parts make a whole become murky, leading to ineffective writing. With this in mind, I exposed my first graders to a finished non-fiction product before diving further into our individual study. I did this by asking learners to discuss a poster I purchased on the topic of amphibians, our example topic. Through our discussions, both small and large group, the children grew in understanding of the author's apparent purpose for the poster and representations of amphibians.

The children's lenses on how to read and research non-fiction texts and topics continued to widen, and their treasures were beginning to emerge as they became invested.

Separated into five small groups, my learners were ready to become researchers. Using books and a small group structure, each group created a poster that represented a particular vertebrate animal category. Based on the children's understanding of non-fiction reading and writing, five wonderful posters were made, discussed, and displayed in our classroom.

The posters were not only a wonderful vehicle for discussion and reference, but I was also able to widen the children's lens of understanding of composers of non-fiction. We discussed the fact that certain learners were better versed in a particular animal category than others; therefore, to promote further inquiry and enable students to individually shine, I encouraged them to tackle a category that they wanted to research further. If interesting information was uncovered, the researcher could share his findings with the class and possibly add this information to the appropriate poster. The small group study had supported the children just enough to encourage this independence and had given them an understanding of a non-fiction product. By gradually releasing responsibility, my learners continued their research on their own during the school day towards becoming more independent in their inquiries.

An Example Research Project: Animals

At last, I felt my learners were ready to tackle our classroom's non-fiction writing adventure. Since we would be visiting the Toledo Zoo two months from the onset of the project, each child was given an animal to research that would be represented at the zoo. The topic was very exciting because children love nature and discovering living things. As well, the children learned that each would become an "expert" on an animal at the zoo. True motivation!

The children weren't the only researchers; I too researched an animal. I became the whale "expert." My learners and I decided on five areas we all needed to cover in our reports, including: habitat, food, animal category, covering, and an interesting fact. I encouraged the children to have a say in collectively deciding areas we all would cover in order to continue encouraging them to become more independent as researchers. Through a reader's workshop, I modeled my own research using various texts. Each child was assigned a buddy to pair with so that each learner would feel supported during independent reading time. At the end of each of our meetings, the children shared their findings with a buddy. The birth of not just one animal expert bloomed: the partnerships supported the sharing of information by many experts, lending powerful support and connection to the process. The children's lenses on how to read and research non-fiction texts and topics continued to widen, and their treasures were beginning to emerge as they became invested.

Gradually Releasing Responsibility through the *Wondering Folder*

Debbie Miller, author of *Reading with Meaning*, suggests that our learning environments must have predictable structures and practices that promote understanding and independence. They include: gradually releasing responsibility, providing students with choice, authentic responses, and time! Thus far, I had supported this philosophy of teaching and my learners were ready for the next step. I sought to empower these researchers to pose their own wondering questions and find answers to them. Consequently, their thinking would tap prior knowledge, build metacognition, and, most importantly, broaden their schema.

I introduced the learners to what I call *The Wondering Folder*, which helps the researcher to pose the question, organize an answer, and keep track of findings. A question is posted on a sticky note and placed on the bottom half of the folder. When an answer to the question is found, the researcher jots it down on the same sticky note and moves it to the top half of the folder. And so the process continues and is simplistic, but there is something incredibly magical about moving a wondering to a know section. A sense of immense accomplishment occurs when a collection of sticky notes are plastered to the known section of the wondering folder. Even the struggling readers and writers felt empowered by the folder because at last the class or I was controlling what each learner would be researching! An energetic buzz could be felt in the room as children worked with their partners. The sharing times at the end of reader's workshop were amazing! After all the modeling and guided practice, these learners were finally in charge of exploring their treasures.

As I observed in amazement, I thought about how older students could utilize this wondering folder. My kids weren't ready yet to sort their findings, but older children could use this tool to narrow information for reporting. It is quite a powerful tool, and as you read on you will learn exactly how it helped my children accomplish the writing piece of their animal reports and beyond.

Creating Research Categories and Transforming Research into Other Genres

My learners gathered an incredible amount of information and it was time to put it to use. I created five centers for the children to participate. Each center was based on one of the five research categories that the children and I created at the start of our study. A book was read at each center to encourage discussion about each category. Then the children were given a template to write what each researched. The wondering folder and other research guidelines were used as a resource.

Besides the five main categories of our report that the children and I initially agreed upon, three other sections were added to complete the report. We accomplished this task during writer's workshop, and I used mentor texts (also see Israel, this volume) and shared writing experiences to support my budding writers. The children almost didn't need me any more except to type their reports; the magic happened that Calkins talked about: My students' research and writing brought meaning to them. This was clearly evident, for example, when one child dedicated his report to his grandpa that hunted skins for him. Another dedicated his report to the animal society. In both cases, neither was my suggestion: the dedications came from their interests.

Although the reports were finally finished, our writing adventure was not complete. I wanted these animal *experts* to transfer their knowledge and write about their research using another genre. In my classroom we study many authors. For example, Eric Carle is one of our favorites because he too loves nature. He uses his expertise to connect to readers. We discussed Carle's style and approach and we decided to use the idea of "five senses" to write poetry that would represent each animal researched. As we worked on them and I read the children's work, I observed that word choice and description danced in their poems, and their descriptions invited readers to envision each animal. Then, each ended his or her poem with a statement about the animal that truly marked the animal's spirit. This month long study of discovering what it takes to become a researcher and writer of non-fiction came full circle as the children transferred their understanding to yet another product, a writing that was perhaps more meaningful than the first.

The End to a New Beginning

To celebrate our accomplishments, the children took part in an "animal expo" evening where they performed

rhythmically to poetic beats, spoke of the research and composing processes through song and rhythm sticks, sang about reaching for the stars, and shared their beautiful projects—a night full of giggles, smiles, and confection treats. The evening allowed the learners to display their expertise as authors of their research on selected animals and to express in costume the rewarding achievement and connection each of them felt and experienced.

Initially, I thought taking on such an endeavor with first graders would squelch choice and transfer. What I didn't realize was the power of modeling and the releasing of responsibility to the learners: amazing things happened as their lenses of understanding widened and they became empowered through a framework created by the learning community. In fact, I learned as much as my students, if not more.

As the school year ended, my learners wrote a passage of how they had bloomed. Their writing and portraits were placed on our classroom bulletin board for next year's first graders to see. As I was placing the works on the board, it was clear to me that the students were touched by reading, researching and writing over our year together. One of the children ended her message with, "I believe in myself." No doubt, her own and other students' new knowledge, skills, and passion for learning will serve them well in the future, particularly as wonderers and researchers.

Works Cited

Calkins, Lucy. *The Art of Teaching Writing*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1994. "Constructivist Theory." *Learning Teaching*. 15 Aug. 2008. 29 June 2008.<http://www.learningandteaching.info/learning/constructivism.htm>.

Carle, Eric. *The Very Quiet Cricket*. New York: Penguin Putnam, 1990. "Literacy with ICT Across the Curriculum." *Literacy with ICT*. 1 July 2008.<http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/tech/lict/resources/handbook/section2.pdf>.

"Grade Level Expectations". Michigan Education. 2007. 1 July 2008. <www.michigan.gov/glce>.

Johnston, Peter H. *Choice Words*. Portland: Stenhouse, 2004.

Michigan' Genre Project: Clarifying Genre Study and Identifying Teaching Points for ELA GLCE Genre. Michigan Department of Education. Retrieved 5 September 2008<http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/Genre_Project_197249_7.pdf>

Miller, Debbie. *Reading with Meaning*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse, 2002.

Ray, Katie Wood. *Study Driven: A Framework for Planning Units of Study in the Writing Workshop*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2006.

About the Author

Cassandra L. Korinek (ckorinek@dexter.k12.mi.us) completed graduate work in early childhood from Old Dominion University. Soon after, she and her family moved to Dexter, Michigan, where she teaches first grade for Dexter Community Schools.