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The Many Faces of Journal Writing

Ursula Morris

When I was in sixth grade, my teacher had us keep a daily writing journal. We spent five to ten minutes retelling the events of the day each afternoon before we packed our bags to go home. I still have my orange-covered spiral notebook and occasionally I flip through it to reminisce about my experiences. I find humorous stories about events I barely remember and ones that I will never forget. I kept records of shopping sprees with my family, talked about swim competitions, vacations taken, and of course, included discussions about friends and our adventures. This is a part of my story, a piece that is written and waiting to be told. It authenticates my memories and proves my journal holds several stories that will someday be shared.

My students know that I kept a journal as a sixth grader and that I still have it tucked away. Many find it hard to believe I still have this relic, but it demonstrates to them how special the experience was. During my student teaching I began to keep a writing journal again. I wrote about daily observations in my teaching, questions that came up, and personal issues that I struggled with. I have since continued to write in journals in order to explore thoughts, ideas, observations, and questions that I have. What an elevating experience recording life in a journal can be. I know that reflecting on my own writing will help me to learn about myself both as a person and as a teacher.

It is easy for me to share journal writing with my students because I see the personal value in it. I want my sixth-grade students to have the opportunity to record their lives and experiences while they are with me. I want students to find their own voices and explore their thoughts freely. I want to encourage my students to keep a writing journal for themselves. I hope they leave my class with a learning tool that they can use anytime.

Introducing Journal Writing to the Students

During the first week of school, I tell my students that we will be writing in journals throughout the entire school year. Students are then responsible for choosing their own type of writing notebook to use as a journal and for bringing it into the classroom. I always keep extra spiral notebooks around for students who cannot bring one of their own. Students choose their own notebooks because they know what will work best for them in a writing situation. I show them different types of notebooks along with the two that I prefer to use: a spiral notebook and a composition book. Students may choose whatever type of notebook they like as long as they think it will last them the entire school year.

In order to introduce students to journal writing and show the benefits of writing in journals, I begin by breaking the class into small groups. Each group is given a different journal sample to read over and determine a purpose for the writing. They look for answers to questions of "Why did the author write about those things?" or "How do you think this helped the author to write about that experience?" Students look over journal entries from books like the *California Diaries* series, *Letters from Ryska*, or from other personal journal entries from past students. As the week progresses, students bring in samples of journal entries that they have encountered in their reading and think will be helpful for the class to look over.

Through this introductory activity and other activities throughout the year, the students discover the different writing styles journals take on. Students come up with purposes for using journals which include telling about feelings, reminders of past times, working through problems and solutions, and most importantly, telling about life—their

lives. I stress these are writing journals, not diaries. Students use their journals to record observations, details, discussions, experiences, or quotes—all of which lets them know their lives are valuable, dynamic, and worth recording. They understand that diaries usually are records of daily activities while journals are often more reflective and can draw on things read, heard, or viewed.

Topic Writing

We begin writing in our journals with topic writing. Topics are assigned by the teacher and are related to the students' lives and their families. The topics range from, "When I was born . . ." to "What are your favorites? Songs? Food? TV shows? Books?" These journal entries are later transformed into a personal brochure that students create to advertise themselves. They read over their journal entries and look for unique information they can share in their personal brochure. Writing about personal topics allows students to think about their own stories and reflect on the influences in their lives. Students share their stories with peers and other adults when their brochures are displayed in the larger learning community.

Topic writing is continued throughout the school year with topics that vary from "Tell about your favorite birthday" to "Will cars, as we know them, be around 100 years from now?" Students are very creative and thoughtful in their responses and are given the opportunity to explore different ideas. The teacher has more control of journal writing when a topic is assigned. Topics can be manipulated to help students focus their thoughts and prepare them for class or small group discussions.

Rachel was a sixth-grade student in my language arts class this past year who showed exceptional growth through her journal entries. As the year progressed, Rachel illustrated changes in her tone of voice and her fluency of language. In an "Inside vs. Outside" topic write, she looked at herself as:

On the outside I'm pretty strong nothing can bother me and that's the way I want some people to think of me. I have many different faces and each one of them I use at the exact right time. Another one of my faces that I use at school is my flirty prissy girl face which I respect the least but still its useful sometimes. I don't like to brag but I'm proud that three different boys asked me out this week. The inside of me only my family and best friends know about. I'm really sensitive and know pretty much anything will set me off crying but I'm getting all my feelings out so it does help me a lot. Another side of me inside is I really never want to leave the house

or the family but I've got to for sports, school, and for their work. My favorite face is my crazy funny face.

This entry focuses on ways Rachel compares her inner feelings with how other people view her. She reflects on her personality and acknowledges she has many sides that she chooses to share in certain situations.

Another topic write strategy is to present current events or issues that might be discussed. I read a newspaper article or relate bits of news I overheard and give the students a chance to respond. After students have written, I allow the students to share their thoughts with partners or small groups around the room, finishing with a large group discussion. This helps students become aware of current issues, and it also helps students express their opinions and develop a point of view. Keeping in mind that topic writing is only one tool used in journal writing, I move the students towards free writing.

Free Writing

Free writing in the journal allows students to record anything they choose: issues they have questions about, observations they make, experiences they have had, or things that may be bothering them. Free writing is a time for the students to express their voice and opinions with complete control over the topic choice. Many students show growth throughout the school year in their writing skills, and their voices become stronger. Rachel's free writing shows how her attitude towards writing changed.

September 22

Dear Journal,

Writing does help me but not as much as I hoped it would. Thank you for writing those comments Mrs. Morris and I just wanted to tell you that it helps me a lot just to show me that you care. Helping me is going to be hard so I suggest you don't even try because of the ways I need help in probably are not going to happen. But I've got to stop writing about this or I'll burst out crying again.

December 11

Dear Journal,

I love writing so I'm just going to write even before Mrs. Morris says to start. Oh here comes the topic. I have no ideas she said first snow fall. Yes! We can free write.

Rachel used her journal in both observant and expressive ways. She evaluates her situation and

reflects thoughtfully on her experiences. She wonders about upcoming school events, friends, teachers, and family. She is able to make connections between her thoughts and experiences using her journal. Her reflective skills continued to develop as the year progressed, and she was often the first student to begin writing on journal days.

Other Strategies

Keeping journal writing interesting and purposeful for the students is an ongoing challenge, and for several students free writing is a difficult task. To help keep students writing, I introduce a different strategy which students refer to as TOP. Sixth graders love to talk, and many students can relate to TOP because it simply means "Talking on Paper." TOP reduces the anxiety students feel when writing a perfectly composed piece and allows them to just get words or thoughts down on paper. TOP is essentially the same idea as free writing, but it leaves open the option for students to comment on what other students are doing or what is going on around the room. Students comment on clothing styles, how they are sitting, what pictures/posters are in the classroom, anything. Some students have silent conversations with themselves or conversations directed towards the teacher or a friend.

Word association is another strategy I use in journal writing. This strategy proved to be most entertaining for the students, and they loved to hear what others had done with a word that was given. To word associate, students write whatever comes to mind about a given word. They can describe it, talk about it, or tell of a personal experience they have had that is associated with the word. Most often these journal entries bring up stories in surprising ways and can translate into a creative story opportunity. Rachel began a word association with the word "tulip" which starts with the obvious by describing its physical characteristics. Like most word associations, she then moves on to a recent activity she was involved in and ends with her trip to the Lugnuts game. Students never know where a word will lead them when they just let all their thoughts out on paper.

Dear Journal,

I think that there are not enough usable hours in the day. Oh this is going to be cool.

Tulip

flower

red garden

picked

large

weed the garden

I hate weeding

got sick of weeding on Saturday so I rode my bike

went to the candy store

got a slush

cold head ache

they hurt

I got hurt

at the Lugnuts game last night

hit my elbow on a chair

I got a teddy bear, mini pizza and base ball

that the Lugnuts played with yesterday

we got home late

How Journals "Fit" into the Classroom

Using journals every day in three different language arts classes can be a challenge. During my first year of using journals with students, notebooks often mysteriously began to disappear when students took them to lockers or just left them at home. I quickly decided that journals needed to stay in the class but still accessible to the students. The solution was as easy as using three different colored crates. Each class has its own crate that I store along a wall, under the chalkboard. This makes it easy for students to access their journals anytime they want them outside of journal writing time. Journals are easily picked up when students enter the classroom and put away when they leave. If a student is absent for an extended period of time, or if a student would like to take home his or her journal over holiday breaks, it is cleared with me first.

If a student is absent for a day, it is his or her responsibility to make up the journal entry some time before I collect journals. To help absent students, I keep a 3x5 file box on my desk with every journal entry assignment recorded on a card. At any time, a student can look in the box for the day they were absent and write in their journal. Responsibility is on the student to complete this task, and if they do not make up this day, it reflects in their overall journal grade.

A writing routine is easily established in the class. The students and I write in our journals twice a week for ten to fifteen minutes in the beginning of each class. I have experimented with writing everyday up to fifteen minutes. This became incredibly difficult and took much of the joy out of personal writing for the students. Writing became more of a school chore than a learning tool. Using journals twice a week has really proven to be the balance. Students enjoy the time they can spend with their thoughts and have more to write about. A timer is set when everyone is ready to write to keep track of time. Writing time is personal, and I stress that this is not a time to disturb neighbors or the teacher. In

order to limit any interruptions, both to the students and myself, I take care of questions and tell students our daily objectives before we start to write. There are some days, however, when other issues take precedence for me, and I am unable to write in my journal.

Along with writing in journals, students have the opportunity to read over their entries and reflect on them. The students know that I too read their journals every four entries. Respecting their privacy, I remind students that journals are a place for them to reflect and think about their experiences. Whatever they write about stays between them and me. If they would like to write about something that they do not want me to read, they have the option of folding over the page and I will not read it. However, I do let them know if they write about something that alarms me, it is my responsibility to discuss the issue with the school counselor or another adult.

Journal writing is a large piece of my overall classroom instruction and is included as a percentage of the student's overall grade. Each entry is assigned up to five points. We establish from the beginning of the school year that about one page or more of writing will be given five points, about a half page will receive three points, and even the slightest effort will result in one point. This varies with each individual student. Each student is different in writing ability and writing style. I look for individual growth in the student's fluency and ability to continue through with his or her thoughts or ideas. If a student begins the school year barely writing a few sentences, we talk about a plan that will help the student grow in his or her writing. As a student progresses in his or her writing, the points grow. Reading only four entries each grading period limits the time it takes to read all the journals and make comments. If a student asks me to read her journal sooner, I usually read it that night. I make supportive comments or ask questions in the margin of each student's journal while I am reading through them. Occasionally, I write an extended response back to students who I feel may need it or who have several questions they want me to answer.

Concluding Thoughts

There are many ways to use journal writing in the class. Writing in journals helps students to become reflective thinkers and more aware of their surroundings. Students need an opportunity to find their own voice, and writing in journals has helped with this objective. The students' voices are authentic and reflect their personalities and uniqueness. I have made time for journal writing in my classroom because of the growth I see in the students and in myself. Journals help students see their thoughts on paper and learn to reflect on the changes and growth they have experienced. Their stories are also waiting to be told.

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About the Author

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