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Everyone Writes a Letter: A Look at Theory and Practice in One Whole Language Classroom

Mary Dekker

Dear Ms. Dekker,

I'm enjoying second grade and having you for a teacher. And I'm having fun. And last year I was in the same class as Matthew. And you have fun things to do. And you're pretty. And I have a little sister. And sometimes she pulls my hair. One time she spilled her bottle and my brother slipped in it and he fell on his face. And my mom laughed and he cried. That was funny. I liked it when he fell and when dad came home he slipped in it too. When Halloween comes I'm going to be a cheerleader.

Susan

After one long October day several years ago I found this letter on my desk. Susan, a student in my whole language classroom, was one of many students who have given me delightful letters like this one. It's a natural thing I suppose. Each year in my second or third grade class, we write often and in many forms, particularly the pen pal letter. While a whole language classroom is more than one that engages students in writing, I want to demonstrate what I believe to be the practice of a whole language teacher as I describe how I go about teaching students to write pen-pal letters. Whole language teachers engage their students in a wide variety of activities. I know for myself that while each year finds me doing many tried and true activities with my students, I must also adapt what I do with different groups. While not all whole language teachers do the same things, we share several beliefs about teaching and learning. In *Understanding Whole Language* Constance Weaver describes fourteen principles and practices of whole language teachers (22-27). Three

key principles of whole language guide my instruction in the teaching of pen pal letters.

First, "language and literacy are best developed through functional use" (24). Students in whole language classrooms use reading, writing, speaking, and listening for authentic purposes. When I first introduce the idea of writing pen-pal letters, I describe to students how they will be making a new friend, but the only way they will know this person is from the letters they write to each other. Students know from the beginning of this activity, then, that their writing has a purpose as well as an audience. Most students are eager to begin the task.

Treating my students as developing and capable rather than incapable and deficient is the second principle (25). As we begin the pen-pal project with another second grade class in another Michigan city, I assume from the beginning that all students will be writing a pen-pal letter. Every student will be able to complete this task.

Teaching from whole to part (23), probably the most controversial principle of whole language, means that we learn to write pen pal letters by writing them. We don't study the parts of a letter in detail. We don't spend a lot of time on punctuating isolated sentences. I don't wait until students have mastered a certain number of spelling words. Instead, I begin with the whole letter using the skills the students have at this point in time.

Writing the Pen Pal Letter

The first day goes something like this. I tell my students that we will be having pen pals with another second- or third-grade class. As I have previously stated, I explain to the students that they

will know this friend only from what they write to each other. We talk for a while and make a list on the board about what students might like to share with their pen pals. Students often list such topics as family, pets, favorite foods, and video games. When the students have generated a list of several topics, we take a look at the conventions of writing a friendly letter such as the heading, greeting, body, and closing. I model on the board how their letter will be set up by writing a short letter and pointing out what I'm doing along the way.

Next, I mention that a letter is a published form of writing. Because their pen pals will need to be able to read and understand the letters, we discuss the importance of capital letters and periods to mark the beginning and ending of sentences, the correct spelling of words, and neatness in printing. I let students know that I will be glad to spell the words they cannot. I also tell them we will meet together to make any needed corrections before the pen pal letters are sent.

Then the students start writing the letters. Some students get right to it. They have been generating ideas while I have been giving the directions and they want to get these ideas down. Other students need more time. Not all students have the same strategies or skills. Below I describe profiles of four types of students and how they come to the pen pal letter activity.

Profiles of Second and Third Grade Pen Pal Writers

I have been doing pen pal letters with second and third graders for at least the last fifteen years. During that time I have discovered four main types that I describe below.

PROFILE ONE

Jill is a student who loves school, likes her teacher, and wants to please. Complications at birth left her with many cognitive as well as physical problems. With a mother who refused to take the low expectations of Jill's doctors as a given, she was determined to help Jill in every way she could. Once Jill reached school-age, her mom worked closely with the school to help Jill take part in and do as much of the regular curriculum as possible. With the help of an exceptional mom, Jill was a high-functioning student. Nevertheless, she was often confused by new tasks and the pen pal letter was no exception. At first she did not understand what we were doing or what she could write about. After going over the initial class talk a second time with her and a few others she was less confused, but I knew she would need extra help to complete the task. I asked her to get her

materials and sit by me. This way I could help her do one step at a time, from writing "Dear Amber," to thinking over some topics, to spelling words, and adding punctuation.

All the ideas and the composing of them were 'her own. When I suggested she might write about her family she said, "Well, I could tell about my birthday."

When I agreed that her birthday would also be a good place to start, she began writing her letter.

When she finished telling about her age and birthday, she asked if she could tell about how her mom didn't like the idea of her getting older. When I acknowledged her idea she added that she would like to tell about her brother too. "You know how we always fight," she added.

Because I worked with Jill throughout the entire writing time we did not need a separate editing conference. She wanted to know as she went along how to spell words, where to put capitals, and how to punctuate.

Jill wrote this letter, and over time with the writing and receiving of several letters, she was not confused, had ideas to write about, and was picking up many conventions.

PROFILE TWO

The next child, Bob, is an above average student when he does many second-grade tasks. Coming to this task he has a fairly good understanding of sentence punctuation and capitalization and spells many words in standard spelling. But, not unlike Jill, he is confused about the task and does not know what he might write about. Bob takes part in the small group where I go over the directions another time. I soon realize that Bob understands the task, but he does not know what to write about or how to start. What I needed to do with Bob was take an extra couple of minutes to write down a few topics. I did this by asking him questions: Could you write about your pets? Would you like to find out if your pen pal likes to play soccer like you do? Would you like to tell him about Halloween? With this coaching, Bob went back to his desk with four topics written on a

small sheet of paper. Other than to spell a few words, I do not need to talk with Bob again until we met at his editing conference.

Dear Drew 1-5-95
How are
you doing? I'm 9
years old. I have horses,
dogs, fish, and a guinea pig. My
sister and brother have
hamsters. Do you have
pets? Do you like
sports? I do baseball
and soccer. That's fun
to play. I was a
werewolf for Halloween.
Your friend, Bob

Bob brought a letter that required very little editing. Consequently, I took the time with Bob to explain a few items of mechanics, such as the misuse of the apostrophe for plurals in words like horses and dogs.

PROFILE THREE

Stacy is an above average student in most second-grade tasks. A very good story writer, she once wrote a wonderful "fractured fairy tale" in a ten-minute sustained writing time. She comes to this task with lots of ideas to write about and no confusion about the task. Stacy's challenge is spelling. She knows the standard spelling of only a few words. She is willing to come and ask for the spelling of words she does not know, but still she ends up with a long letter with many spelling mistakes. Most of her editing conference is spent rewriting words with the correct spelling.

PROFILE FOUR

The final profile is of George, a very competent writer, who not only has a number of ideas to write about, but has very little difficulty with standard spelling and punctuation. George goes about the task with ease, asking occasionally for the spelling of a few words, needing very little help from me.

March 1 1994
Dear Jonathan,
How are you?
I like the Bulls too.
I like Scottie Pippen.
My school is Morris.
I have blond hair too.
I like the Olympic games.
I like Tommy Moe and
Picabo Street.
We are working
on a Dinosaur
Museum.

from your
penpal
George

When George comes to the editing conference the letter is already close to what will be the final form. Like the conference with Bob, I can take time to explain some other editing skills. With George I explain the uses of "to, too, and two."

The Principles of Whole Language in Practice

The four profiles described above demonstrate the range of learning needs for this task, from those students who are confused about the task and do not know standard writing conventions, to students who understand the task and are also competent in most conventions. Yet, each child comes to the task with his or her own individual learning needs and challenges. I have to assess where they are, and what they need from me in terms of instruction. Specifically, I must decide when I need to intervene and when I need to back away. Jill, for example, needs my help throughout the task, while George does not need it until the very end when I can add to what he already knows about written language. Working with students in this way, I validate what they already know and teach them what they still need to learn. At all times they are treated as capable learners.

For Jill and students like her, directions needed to be given a second time. This was a hard lesson for me to learn. For a long time I believed that students who did not understand were not listening. I learned over time that the students were listening but still did not understand. Now my expectations for any new lesson have changed. I expect that I will have to go through directions a second time for many students. They need to hear them again and have an opportunity to phrase the task their own way. These students often ask questions that start with the phrase: do you mean we...?

As I help individual students with their immediate writing challenges in the midst of this authentic task, all students are able to complete their letters. All students are engaged in writing a meaningful text. They approach the task whole to part as they begin writing the letter. As they write the letters, however, there are many parts to con-

tend with, from the act of composing their thoughts, to encoding them on paper, to spelling words in standard spelling, to using the multitude of writing conventions needed to complete a letter. As I meet with each child at the editing conference, we look at the various parts: do the ideas make sense? are the words spelled correctly? is the proper punctuation used? I point out the necessary changes. The child makes them. And we have come back to a whole text we can send to the pen pal.

Extending the Activity

Once students are accustomed to writing letters, letter writing can be used for many purposes across the curriculum. Some ideas include: writing letters about books to the teacher and other students in a reading log; writing a letter to a character in a book; writing a letter to the teacher describing what the student understands about the current topic of study in science or social studies. I have asked students to write to classmates who have moved away. Bob's letter to his

friend, Jamey, is one of the most delightful letters I know. Once I had students write to new friends

in their cooperative groups. Occasionally, I have had students write letters to parents about what we were doing in school, or letters of invitation to our classroom dinosaur museum. During the

Persian Gulf War we wrote to soldiers. In a whole language classroom extensions abound! Since the students make connections all the time, asking them to write a letter for a different purpose is not difficult.

Conclusion

In a whole language classroom all students work on authentic tasks. They learn by doing. I could have chosen any number of the activities my students engage in to describe whole language. It's not the activity but the guiding theory behind it. And, in the end, this is what makes for a whole language classroom. Whatever I do with my students, I respect their level of intelligence and expect them to succeed. Engaging students in authentic tasks, which they tackle from whole to part, is the stuff whole language classrooms are made of. The vision of what I want my classroom to be becomes real, one meaningful activity at a time.

Works Cited

Weaver, Constance. *Understanding Whole Language: From Principles to Practice*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1990.

About the Author

Mary Dekker, a Red Cedar Writing Project participant and co-editor of LAJM, teaches second and third grade at Morrice Elementary School.