MICHIGAN READING JOURNAL

Michigan Reading Journal

Volume 30 | Issue 3 Article 5

June 1997

Volunteer Patterns in a Literature-Based Classroom

Sarah J. McCartney

Courtney J. Kahn

Volunteer Patterns in a Literature-Based Classroom

ARTICLE BY **SARAH J. MCCARTHEY AND COURTNEY J. KAHN**

Talk is a medium for teachers to provide instruction and students to structure meaning (Cazden, 1988). Students learn to display competence in becoming members of a community through participation in classroom talk (Edwards & Westgate, 1994). The expectation is that wide student participation will result in increased student learning. However, the traditional pattern in which teachers initiate, students respond, and teachers evaluate limits the amount of student interaction and is incongruent for students from diverse cultural backgrounds who use different patterns at home, (Au, 1993, Cazden, 1988; Heath, 1983, Michaels, 1987). Even routines purposely established to foster more student input such as storytime often become conventionalized with particular rules and roles. Teachers manage participation in orderly ways, expecting appropriate willingness to talk, and relevant comments (Edwards & Westgate, 1994).

Altering traditional discourse patterns through teacher-led discussions (Nystrand, 1993), peer work groups (Meloth, 1991), and "sharing sessions" in which students read their writing aloud seem to provide all students, and particularly those from diverse backgrounds, with opportunities to construct knowledge and learn from each other. "Authentic discourse" in which interactions are purposeful, open to participation, and provide opportunities for students to discuss alternative perspectives are key to promoting successful learning (Nystrand & Gomoran, 1991). An enlargement of everyone's understanding can occur when groups construct meaning. This type of dialogue can prove to be quite motivating to participants (Schallert & Reed, 1997).

As part of a larger ethnographic study, this paper examines how a potentially powerful practice of "book response time" in which students responded to and shared their responses to text was enacted in a literature-based classroom. Specifically, we examined the following questions: (a) What was the nature of the volunteer patterns during "book response time over the course of the year? (b) What motivated students to share their writing with their teachers and peers?

Methods

Classroom Context — Located in an urban area in the Southwest, the school population consisted of 56% Hispanic, 38% European-American, and 6% African American, with 62% of the students on free or reduced lunch. Data were gathered in two multi-age classrooms with students from ages 8-10. The teachers considered their classroom a literature-based one because they did not use basal readers. Students were allowed to read tradebooks and to write on topics of their own choice. Central to the curriculum was "book response time" in which the two teachers selected particular books to read aloud to students. This time was a forum to develop vocabulary and to help students improve the quality of their written expression. Extension activities were also designed around the books.

The daily routine consisted of the following. A total of 48 students sat on the carpet to listen to a book read aloud. The teachers alternated with one another reading aloud chapters from a book, while the other took notes that summarized the chapter on a large piece of chart paper. The teachers then provided 5-7 minutes for students to write in reflective journals. After writing in their journals, about six to ten students either volunteered or were called on to read their responses aloud Either or both teachers commented on student work, focusing on students' use of vocabulary words from the book in their own writing and the inclusion of interesting details. Formal peer responses were not part of the routine, but students occasionally whispered their comments to one another after listening to a peer read aloud.

With each book, there was a particular emphasis for students' responses. For example, as part of the unit on immigration teachers read the nonfiction, photo essay by Russell Freedman entitled *Immigrant Kids*; students were encouraged to make observations about the photos. When responding to *Letters from Rifka* by Karen Hesse, students were instructed to take on the persona of Rifka, a Jewish immigrant, and to write their entries in letter form. During *The Incredible Journey of Lewis and Clark* by Rhoda Blomberg, students wrote in journal form as if they were the character from the text. Some students took this to what the teachers considered an extreme — taking on the perspective of squirrels in the trees rather than Lewis or Clark. In the unit on Tall Tales, the focus was on realism versus exaggeration, and students wrote their own tall tales. In the last book, *Johnny Texas* by Carol Hoff, about a family's struggles when settling Texas, students were encouraged to connect the characters' experiences to their own.

Classroom Observations — Videotapes and field notes of classroom interactions were the main sources of data. Researchers videotaped classroom interactions approximately once a week from October through April. For this paper a total of 13 sessions were analyzed for volunteer patterns.

Interviews — We conducted one interview with the teachers during the school year. We drew on our observations to form questions about book response time. Questions focused on teachers' perceptions of teacher-student interaction, rationale for 11 volunteer versus calling on students, and expectations of "good writing."

From the 48 students in the combined class, we interviewed 15 students — all of those who returned signed permission forms Questions focused on frequency of reading aloud their work, attitudes toward reading aloud, perceptions of teacher and student response to what they wrote, and beliefs about "good writing."

Additionally, we conducted a whole class interview with the teachers and students at the end of April in which we showed students segments of videotapes and asked them to comment. We also asked questions about their views of book response time, sharing their work, and suggestions for revisions to book response time.

Analyses — Using Bogdan and Biklen's (1992) approach to ethnographic analyses, videotapes of classroom observations were viewed repeatedly by two researchers looking for patterns of teacher-student interaction. Analyses focused on calling patterns (e.g., whether students volunteered or whether the teachers called on Students) and the nature of teachers' responses (e.g., focus on vocabulary from the book, language, creativity, or the amount students had written).

The videotapes of student interaction were used to determine how many students were volunteering during book response time. We counted the number of raised hands prior to each sharing turn and found the total number of volunteers per classroom observation as well as the average number of volunteers per turn. Each raised hand was counted; we did not make a distinction between students who volunteered only once and students who volunteered several times throughout the observation. The videotape did not show the entire class, so we counted only those hands that appeared on the video.

Analyses of the student interview data were both independently coded and collaboratively constructed. Researchers used emerging categories such as frequency of sharing, motivation to share, qualities of good writing, and perceptions of teachers' responses to code the student data. Teacher interview data were used to construct a clearer understanding of teachers' decisions (e.g , why they chose to establish a system for calling on students).

Themes

Volunteer Patterns — Over the course of the school year, the volunteer patterns changed significantly.

When students simply volunteered to read their work in the beginning of the year, there were a large number of volunteers. Yet, teachers perceived that the same students were volunteering all the time and decided to implement a system that would allow more students to share. By the end of the year, the volunteer patterns fell off considerably.

Volunteering — At the beginning of the school year, the teachers implemented a sharing system in which students volunteered to share their writing. Students simply raised their hands to volunteer to share. During the weeks in which students were encouraged to volunteer (Observations 1-3), they seemed excited about their writing and sharing. There were a total of 46 volunteers during sharing time on two different occasions. Students raised their hands repeatedly in an effort to get the teachers' attention. If they were not called on during a particular turn, they kept their hands raised throughout other students' sharing and between turns in attempts to be recognized on subsequent turns. When they were encouraged to volunteer, as many as ten students might have been volunteering at once, and many students volunteered to share more than once in any given week.

In addition to raising their hands to volunteer, students exhibited enthusiasm through indirect participation as others shared. Students listened quietly to one another and obviously paid attention to their peers as they shared. Although peer response to the writings was not encouraged as part of book response time, students responded informally to what their peers were reading. They laughed or cringed at times during the sharing and when a student finished sharing, they turned to one another and made informal comments on the response that had just been shared. Between sharing turns, students actively waited for the next volunteer to be called on. Students seemed to be interested in what their peers had to say and enthusiastic about sharing their ideas with others.

Transitions — During the volunteer stage of sharing, the teachers became concerned that the same students were always volunteering to share and that other students were not having opportunities to share, an assumption not supported by the data. The data showed that different students were volunteering. Over three observations sixteen different students volunteered and were

called on to share. In response to their concerns, however, the teachers implemented a new sharing system (Observations 4-10) in which students were actually discouraged from volunteering. The teachers kept a list of students, called on students who, according to the teachers' records, had not yet shared during that week, and checked off students as they shared. During the transition stage, students continued to raise their hands to volunteer to share. The teachers asked them if they had already shared that week, and if they had, the teachers gently reminded them about the new system and asked them to put their hands down. The number of students raising their hands to volunteer began to decline, and the number of total volunteers dropped from the 46 during the volunteering stage of book response time to fewer than 20.

With the decline in the number of volunteers came an evident decline in motivation and enthusiasm toward the sharing of their book responses. The overall atmosphere surrounding the sharing of book responses became quiet and strained as students struggled to share responses with which they were not satisfied. Between turns, students sat quietly and waited for the next sharer to be called on. They no longer commented on each other's book responses, even informally.

Teacher Selection — As the year continued, and students became accustomed to being selected rather than volunteering. The number of Students who did volunteer continued to decline. Turns passed with no students volunteering. Occasionally, a student forgot the new system and volunteered, but he/she was told to put his/her hand down and wait to be called on.

It seemed that students began to put less effort into their book responses. Teachers commented on the length of students' book responses and reprimanded students for not writing enough, often saying that the responses were too short and that the teachers wanted to see more writing. One student, who had been called on and who, according to the teachers, had not written enough, was asked to share again the next day.

Comments on the length of students' writing became more frequent as the year progressed, leading us to believe that some students, knowing that they had already shared that week and realizing that meant that they would probably not be called on to share again, did not put as much effort into their book responses as they may have at the beginning of the year. Other students were reluctant to share when they were called upon. For example, when Ian was called on to share, he shook his head to decline, but the teachers requested he share anyway.

The time between turns became "dead time" as teachers studied lists to determine whom to call on next. Several students became restless during these times, and the teachers began to use the sharing of book responses as a behavior management tool, calling on students who did not seem to be paying attention or who were acting out.

The decline in motivation to share might be attributed to the fact that students had been participating in book response time all year and were not as enthusiastic about their book response logs and volunteering to share based on "too much of a good thing." The student interview data does not support that idea, however. The students, interviewed during the last month of the school year, still said that they wanted to share, sometimes more than once a week, and that they wished they had more time in class to write and to share their writing.

Students' perceptions of what motivat-

ed them to share — Several themes were reflected in students' comments about sharing their writing. Students found that teachers' positive comments, peers' smiles and laughter, their own sense of having written a good piece, and responding to an interesting chapter motivated them to read their writing aloud. Conversely, teachers' negative comments, peers' inattention, being called on to read when they were not prepared or did not like what they had written, and responding to a "boring" chapter were reasons for not wanting to share their work.

Teachers' comments — Several students identified specific comments teachers made that encouraged them to read their writing aloud. For example, Sarah paraphrased the teachers saying, "I like that word you used. I like the way you put yourself in the story." Carl remembered that on his first quick write the teachers had said, "that was a very good detail and (you) used a lot of the vocabulary ... that encourages me." Students, then, enjoyed having the teachers respond to their work. They found that most of the times teachers complimented their work or made a specific comment about what they liked. One student expressed that, "if they did not like your work, then they would not compliment it," seeming to suggest that the teachers were sincere when they expressed appreciation and enjoyment.

Likewise, a few students pointed out that the absence of compliments indicated displeasure with their work. Other comments that students interpreted as negative, and therefore, not motivating were those that focused on length of their piece or lack of attention to the story or others' writing. Several students responded that not writing enough was a reason for the teachers to respond negatively. A few believed that they were called on, not because the teacher wanted to hear their work, but as a sanction — they appeared not to be paying attention.

Peers' responses — Although students were not encouraged to respond aloud to each others' work (that was reserved for the teachers), the students often had a sense of how well their work was accepted by their peers. For example, several students noted that they felt good when peers paid attention, smiled, or laughed at their work. Of particular value was appreciative laughter. Several students mentioned that they liked Cammy's work because she put herself into the character, used dialogue, and made them laugh. Sarah also mentioned that she knew when students liked her work because "I write some funny things and they laugh." Students also occasionally made side comments to their friends or students whose work they liked after listening to them read aloud. Ajay mentioned two friends who complimented her and as a result she felt "really proud of myself because I've written a really good thing in my journal." Carl articulated that he believed students listened to him because they got ideas for their own writing. He said, "If one person talks about how their hands got swollen from the grapes that they picked-this was yesterday — and another person picks that when they stopped the cart, the coachman thought they were going to steal the baggages (sic), and you could say, 'Oh, I never thought of that.'" Conversely, students were not motivated to share when they felt that peers would not pay attention or appreciate their work.

Identifying quality in their own writing — Most striking in terms of what motivated students to read their work aloud was the students' own valuing of the particular pieces they had written that day. When students liked what they had written, they volunteered to share and were disappointed if they did not

have an opportunity to read aloud. Sarah, for example, said that she would like to share "twice or maybe three times a week or whenever I feel that I have a good quick write." Her criteria for good quick writes were, "a lot of details and expression. I like when I can think of stuff to add in like when I added 'the sunshine smiling' and stuff." Ajay described her own process of deciding whether to share or not as the following, "I read over my writing and see if it's good enough and then I correct some stuff so I won't mess up." Most students had a clear sense of when they had written a quality piece and hoped that they could share that day. Cammy replied, "Usually I know if it's good, because if I really liked that chapter and it was very descriptive then I put a lot of effort into my quick writes that day." However, the new management system required that only a certain number of students share daily and those were students who had not yet shared that week

Students' responses to this system of not volunteering was generally negative, mostly because they were no longer in charge of evaluating their own work and deciding whether or not to share it. Cynthia said she did not like being called upon because "the teachers get to call your name and I don't like reading some days and Mrs. B still picks me." Likewise on another occasion when she wanted to read twice in a week, "I raised my hand about two times in the week but she said only once so I couldn't read so I had to read the next week."

Reasons for students not wanting to share included lack of quality work, lack of time to complete their piece, or embarrassment because of the personal nature of their piece. Students indicated that sometimes they did not feel like writing and their work reflected their lack of motivation. Several students felt quite constrained by the time crunch. Cray volunteered the following information about quick writes, "I wish we had more time to write because there's so much and you can't get your ideas down, and I wish we had more time to write. I think that would be better because more kids would share it, write more stuff, especially like this one, like this chapter, I bet a lot of people would write more, but in seven minutes ..." Aurora felt much the same way as Ajay and expressed her feelings in these terms, "getting everything that you're thinking in the time that we have and then reading out loud to everybody it's just that sometimes you don't get to finish your sentences."

Cynthia did not want to read aloud when her piece was of a personal nature, for example, when someone in her family died. Before volunteering to read she could evaluate her piece and decide, "Is it good or kind of sad or a little bit crazy. And when it's crazy or I don't like it, I don't raise my hand." And yet Cynthia got called on anyway if it were her turn in the lottery. An additional consideration for her was that she had a low voice and the teachers often asked her to speak up to be heard. Her reaction was, "I talk low and everything and they say talk louder and I don't feel like talking louder because it hurts my throat because I'm a little bit sick." Students were quite capable of judging the quality of their work and were somewhat resentful of having to forfeit their choice in order to give everyone a chance to share.

An additional consideration when evaluating their work to decide whether it was quality was the chapter that was read aloud by the teacher. Several students suggested that the content of the chapter that was read aloud had a distinct influence on whether or not they wanted to share, Monica suggested, "When I hear good stuff, I like to write." Their logic was that if the chapter were interesting, as Ajay suggested, "had lots

of details and information in it," it provoked them to write more detailed, powerful pieces. Monica's idea of an exciting chapter was "like people when they eat berries and they got their lips all red." That excerpt from *Johnny Texas* made her want to write an exciting quick write. Aurora felt that she wanted to share when she had really strong feelings about an issue such as women's rights in Johnny Texas. She read her quick write to the interviewer:

> *Dear Journal, I do think Papa should have considered Mama's feelings but not by calling her woman. I think that's very mean and inconsiderate Women, to me, had no rights and could not even vote back their. I cannot believe men back then were so rude and hostile. I mean everyone accepts women nowadays. So why didn't they back then?*

Aurora said that she wanted to read that selection aloud because "I had a really strong feeling about it." Conversely, a boring chapter led to writer's block or a boring quick write. Ian said, "it's harder because I have to think of stuff that I like" indicating either that it is quite difficult to identify a topic when there is not much to like about the chapter, or that criticizing a chapter was not a sanctioned response.

Conclusions/Recommendations

Our glimpse into a classroom where teachers are experimenting with different formats to encourage participation reveals that volunteer patterns seem to be context specific. The teachers appeared to be quite well-intentioned in terms of increasing participation and encouraging a more "democratic" environment where all students would have a turn to read aloud. The new management system might be considered successful if we judge its effectiveness on the number of students who read their work aloud in a week, presumably all 48 students had an opportunity to read their work aloud weekly. However, if we judge the "new system" based on the numbers of volunteers and student motivation to participate, the new system was a failure. Fewer students volunteered to read aloud and motivation to share decreased.

Teachers' and students' responses to their writing were important features that motivated students to share their writing with others. However, quality in their writing was the essential indicator of their willingness to share. All but one of the students interviewed wanted to share frequently, but not when they had to sacrifice quality of writing or choice of whether to share or not.

Our findings suggest that students having choices over when to share their work was central to their motivation to read aloud. Our work is supported by Deci and Ryan's (I 987) theory that suggests that autonomy is a key feature in encouraging motivation. They suggest there are two kinds of environments, autonomy-supporting (performing for satisfaction and pleasure) and controlling (performing for external reasons such as rewards, obligations, or threats). Our observations of book response time suggest that the classroom environment shifted from an autonomy-supporting environment in the beginning of the year to a controlling one in the end. Initially, students seemed intrinsically motivated, reading aloud for the satisfaction and pleasure of hearing their work, peers' responses and teachers' comments. However, by the end of the year, a more controlling environment existed in which students were expected to meet the teachers' expectations about length of pieces and had little control over whether they could share or not.

Implications for Practice

Some guiding principles that follow from this study include the following. First, researchers and teachers can examine the entire notion that underlies a kind of "forced participation" — the notion that not sharing orally indicates students are not participating. In our study we found that students' nods, smiles, laughter and side comments indicated their involvement in listening to and appreciating their peers' work. We claim that these students were participating as much as those students who actually read aloud. Second, students need autonomy and choice. The students we observed and interviewed seemed quite capable of judging the quality of their own work and deciding whether or not to share it. Students need opportunities to exercise their judgment and have control over reading aloud. As one student recommended in the whole class discussion, would let the kids that really really wanted to share like twice a week, let them share. Respecting students' right to read aloud or remain silent should be a fundamental principle that guides classroom participation. Allowing a default mode, i.e., students are allowed to decline sharing their work if they are unhappy with the quality, can provide another way for students to control their participation

Third, teachers can create multiple contexts for students sharing their work with others. For example, a whole group session with 48 students gathered together may not be the best context to support widespread participation. Rather, smaller groups of students with opportunities to rotate groups could allow more students to read more frequently. Further, varying the nature of the response patterns may make sharing more exciting and motivational. One student suggested that, "Instead of writing, we could just get up and talk about what we think about the book." Encouraging students to talk about books more informally, to dramatize events, or to design artistic responses would provide more ways for students who have a variety of backgrounds, talents, and interests to express their understanding of the books.

References

Au, K. (1993). *Literacy instruction in multicultural settings.* Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace. Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. 1992). Qualitative research methods for education. (2nd edition) Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Cazden, C. B. (1989). *Classroom discourse: The language of teaching and learning.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R, M. (I 987). The support of autonomy and control of behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* 5-3, 1024-1037,

Edwards, A. D., & Westgate, D. P. G. (1994). *Investigating classroom talk.* London Falmer.

Fulwiler, T. (1991). Student journals. In B. M Power & R. Hubbard (Eds.) *Literacy Process* (pp, 203-220). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words.* New York: Cambridge University

Meloth, M. (1991). Enhancing literacy through cooperative learning. In E. H. Hiebert (Ed.), *Literacy for a diverse society,* (pp, 172-183), New York Teachers College Press.

Michaels, S. (1987). Text and context: A new approach to the study of classroom writing. *Discourse Processes, 10,* 321-346.

Nystrand, M. 1993). Dialogic instruction and the social mediation of learning and understanding: A two-year study of classroom discourse in eight-and ninth-grade classrooms. A paper presented at the American Educational Research Association, Atlanta.

** This paper was supported, in part, by a National Academy of Education post doctoral fellowship from the Spencer Foundation to the first author.*

Table 1: Volunteer Patterns During Book Response Time

Stage	Observation	Date	# Volunteers*	Volunteers per turn*
Volunteering	#1	9/27/95	12	4
	#2	10/4/95	46	5.8
	#3	10/11/95	46	5.1
Transitions	#4	10/25/95	29	4.1
	#5	11/1/95	7	2.3
	#6	11/15/95	6	1
	#7	11/16/95	14	1.5
	#8	1/10/96	5	1
	#9	1/12/96	8	1.3
	#10	1/26/96	10	1.1
Teacher Selection	#11	3/8/96	10	1.4
	#12	4/3/96	8	1.5
	#13	4/17/96	13	0.88

** The videocamera was not able to show the entire class; numbers are based on the number of students that were shown on video plus students called on off-camera.*