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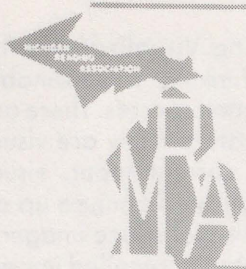
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USING JOURNALS IN THE READING CLASSROOM TO HELP STUDENTS LEARN TO LEARN

Judy Zolman

English teachers have used student journals quantitatively as an effective means to get students writing and qualitatively as an effective means to improve writing skills. These ungraded journals can also be used in the reading classroom to teach students to be responsible for the learning process, to set goals for improvement, to become active rather than passive learners, to develop flexibility, to create a schema for learning and studying, to see how motivation and behavior as well as skills affect learning and study, and to establish a necessary dialogue between student and teacher.

During the semester, students in my reading classes were asked to keep a weekly one-page journal in which they recorded anything to do with reading and studying. They could write about such things as preparation for tests, reactions to test results, difficulties in reading content materials, strategies that seemed to help, problems in skills such as note taking, goals for the reading class as well as content classes, and reactions to reading outside of school in novels, non-fiction, and periodicals. Not all of the students limited themselves to the reading and studying criteria. Perhaps

because of the one page minimum requirement, or because of pressing concerns in non-academic areas, they also wrote about such things as what they did over the weekend, family difficulties, and peer relationships. A few students chose not to complete the assignments at all. Although I did not grade the journals, I did write at least one comment following their entries. The comments served as a feedback for ideas, not composition proficiency. At the end of the semester, the students were given class time to reread all of the journals in order to make observations about themselves as learners, to label these observations as either negative or positive, and to write a one page reflective essay about themselves as students. Of course, if they did not mention studying or reading activities in the journals or did not complete the assignments, this was an observation in itself.

One benefit of the journal activity was that students observed that learning is learner directed and that they as learners are responsible for the learning process. Rather than viewing performance from an "entity" theory of intelligence in which intelligence is considered a fixed entity that is both general and judgable through performance as adequate or inadequate, students were able to observe that intellectual competence is based on skills that are continuously expanded through effort, as in the "incremental" or "instrumental" theory of intelligence (Dweck & Elliott, 1983, p. 655).

Rather than viewing considerable effort as evidence of low intelligence, considerable



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effort was viewed as a means to increase intelligence. Success, therefore, was observed to be based on **effort**, not high intelligence, luck, or relative task difficulty. Nowhere in the journals or in the reflective essays did students refer to their intelligence or IQ as high or low. Neither did they express the feeling that they could not succeed if only they could improve the skills they viewed as necessary for success. Achievement was viewed as a real possibility and not an impossible goal. Kris expressed this view of effort as important to success by saying, *"I noticed that in the beginning of the year I was doing all right, but up until now I have improved quite a bit. In the beginning of the year, I didn't work as much, but once I did, I saw that I was doing better."*

Learning as learner controlled was another benefit from the journal activity. Students began to set goals for improvement and to view this goal setting as an important key to achievement. Goals were centered around learning rather than performance. Instead of "performance" goals to obtain favorable judgments of competence, students moved toward "learning" goals to increase competence, which involves "seeking to acquire knowledge or skills, to master or understand something new" (Dweck & Elliott, 1983, p. 645). Students used goals to plan strategies and to facilitate learning. Jeff noted, *"In my journals I said how I was going to study more, and I do. But there are some goals which I have not accomplished yet. For example, I do not read enough on my own time."*

Students also learned the importance of becoming active rather than passive learners. Instead of being controlled by events and outcomes which lead to dependence and to fear of failure, students began to realize that they could control events and outcomes by their actions, by taking an active part in their learning.

In addition to becoming aware that learning is learner directed and that learners must take an active part in their learning while setting goals for improvement, students also began to consider flexibility as an important quality. They were willing to try new approaches if one approach failed. They learned that it was all right to have problems or failures as long as they learned from them.

Heidi reflected, *"I could not accomplish the goals I set for myself. For instance, reading something once and being able to comprehend it well enough without having to go back over it several more times."* Rather than feeling a failure, she redirected her thinking, *"Perhaps I will be more successful in the future by breaking down my large goals and replacing them with smaller ones that I can manage more easily."*

Through the journal activity, students created a schema for learning and studying. Students were concerned with what it means to be a student, with the combination of skills and attitudes necessary for learning to take place.

Students began to see how motivation and behavior, as well as skills, affect learning and study. Brian wrote, *"I learned that I am concerned about my grades but do not go to the teacher,"* and *"I do not do a lot of my homework, but it is a habit I am trying to break."* Amy observed, *"I think my attitude changed a lot. I discovered that my attitude at the beginning of the year was terrible. It seems like I didn't think I could do anything. But now as I read the more recent ones, I see my attitude has changed and my grades have gone up a lot. I learned a lot about how important it is to have a good attitude for school."*

Finally, the journal activity helped establish a necessary dialogue between student and teacher that is important for diagnosis and rapport. It helped to replace a classroom setting with a tutorial situation in which the teacher could become a resource and guide rather than a judge of performance. As Samantha wrote in her reflective essay, *"By reading my journals, a person could really get to know me."*

In conclusion, the value of the journal activity as a tool to increase achievement motivation by making students aware that there is more to learning than skills makes journal writing in the reading classroom a worthwhile activity. Jeff observed, *"By writing down thoughts and study habits, I can understand them more."* This self-awareness and self-understanding is one way to help students learn to learn.

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emphasized. Gifted readers already have in place the skills of literal comprehension (knowledge and recall). This approach allows the gifted reader to be a part of a peer group instead of being an isolated, independent reader. Spin-off benefits include the sharpening of listening skills, the broadening of insights, and the development of higher-level thinking and discussion skills.

The second component of our reading program systematic development of the independent study process. Teachers of the gifted need to give as much opportunity for self-direction and responsibility as the students are able to handle. This freedom of direction and expression is a priority goal for gifted readers. We need to retain this freedom while teaching the underlying structure that prepares students to do independent study. Our District utilizes the **Self-Starter Kit for Independent Study**, by Doherty and Evans, as our process model. The kit teaches the skills of selecting topics, making a schedule, recording procedures, writing objectives, finding resources, taking notes, writing final objectives, creating a product, and evaluating. The objective of this process is to help students become self-directed learners while providing opportunities for both individual and small group activities.

The third component of our reading program for the gifted stresses the importance of developing individual interests in reading and recreational reading. We allow time during the school day for independent reading. Students may choose from a selection of good literature, classics, poetry, etc. Accompanying this portion of our program is a follow-up of activities that is expected of each student. This follow-up activity involves such things as writing book reports, auctioning off of a story or book to classmates, designing a commercial for a book, creating a diorama, writing a book review for the class newspaper, and many other activities that stress creativity.

Finally, it is our opinion that the gifted reader needs to experience a wide range of literature. Teachers of the gifted provide guidance to students through the development of thematic units. Thematic units are based on one type of literature, such as biography, autobiography, science fiction,

historical fiction, and the classics. Sometimes the thematic unit is built around an idea, such as courage, loyalty, honesty, friendship, etc. This approach allows the student an opportunity for individual expression within the framework of a specific theme, with the objective being the broadening of his or her literary experiences. Our ultimate goal in the reading program for the gifted is integration and application of the curriculum in the content areas, including science and social studies.

As our reading curriculum evolved, one of the most important steps was the selection of the appropriate material. It is important when choosing materials that they address the higher-level thinking skills, as well as being at the appropriate instructional level. It is also important that the social and emotional development of the students is taken into consideration when selecting materials. Our program has selected a wide variety of material that spans the range from the fourth-grade level through the adult level, for example, **Vocabulary for College** (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich) and junior high **Scholastic Literature Kits**.

In conclusion, we have continued to evaluate, upgrade, and refine the entire gifted curriculum, with particular emphasis on reading. Each year has brought us ever closer to the development of an effective, truly differentiated curriculum for our students.

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