

2012

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Recommended Citation

KoplitzHarty, Stephanie J. and Serr, Konnie (2012) "The Anything Writing Project in First Grade," *NALS Journal*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/nals/vol3/iss1/2>

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Cover Page Footnote

The authors would like to acknowledge Grace B. Luhrs University Elementary School teachers, staff and students, Dr. Philip Diller, previous Director, GBLUES, Dr. James Johnson Dean of The College of Education and Human Services, Dr. Barbara Lyman. Provost, and the SU Foundation, all from Shippensburg University, Shippensburg , Pennsylvania. Also thanks to NALS, 2009 Annual Conference.

“The Anything Writing Project in First Grade”

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Introduction

This article gives an overview of varying levels of engagement observed in the Grace B. Luhrs University Elementary School First Grade classroom during “Anything Writing” writing workshop. Children in first grade at Grace B. Luhrs are encouraged to use topics of their own choosing when creating their written work while at the same time following basic steps in the writing process.

The “Anything Writing” approach offers differentiated instruction opportunities for diverse learners within a community of writers. Observations by university faculty, university students and the first grade teacher are included along with student writing samples. This article is the result of our presentation given at the 2009 National Association of Laboratory Schools Annual Conference hosted by the Barbara K. Lipman Early Childhood School and Research Institute and the Campus School at the University of Memphis.

Rationale

Writing Workshop has been an inspiration to young writers in the elementary classroom for over two decades (Graves, 1983, Calkins, 1986), but has recently diminished in frequency in many classrooms due to high-stakes testing. The focus on writing “for the test” has come to the forefront in elementary classrooms (Manzo, 2001). In response to this test driven focus at the cost of Writing Workshop, there is a recent resurgence towards revitalizing elementary students’ interest and engagement in authentic writing (Bagtas, 2006, Lo & Hyland, 2007, Pacquette, 2008). In addition, due to current economic impacts on education as seen in increased class size and cutback on staffing, there has been increased interest in partner writing and cross-age tutoring (Davenport, 2004, Pacquette, 2008).

The “Anything Writing” Writing Workshop project focuses on authentic, as opposed to test-driven writing in the classroom. It also includes opportunities for differentiated instruction, and the opportunities for partnered writing with university students. The theoretical foundation of Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development and scaffolded instruction (1978) along with the research pedagogy of Max Van Manen (1990) provided the framework for the project.

In particular, Lev Vygotsky’s concept of process rather than product analysis alone is central to the “Anything Writing” writing project. “Process analysis will reveal”, according to Vygotsky, “the real, causal or dynamic relations” which result in “explanatory”, rather than merely “descriptive”,

analysis. (Vygotsky, 1978. p. 65). The “Anything Writing” partnered writing project incorporates process analysis of the first graders’ developmental levels and attitudes towards the writing process and product analysis of the actual writing produced by the first graders.

Van Manen, on the other hand, looks at the here and now in the sense of the perspective or stance taken by a researcher. Van Manen asserts that “research and writing are . . . practically inseparable pedagogical activities.” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 4). The researcher’s thinking slides as though on a tilted scale between phenomenology, which is the description of one’s experience, and hermeneutics, which is one’s interpretation of the “texts” of life. The result is a reflective practice, or a written reflection, which offers a research approach that is fundamental to the process of pedagogy. Hence, our reflection as researchers and authors in this article includes both description and interpretation of the “Anything Writing” experience.

In addition, Van Manen identifies “lived meaning” as the way that we understand world experiences to be “real and meaningful.” First graders at Grace B. Luhrs University Elementary School were offered opportunities for describing their lived experiences through free choice of writing topic. This free choice approach culminated in the real and meaningful understanding, or “lived meaning” in Van Manen’s terms.

Project Description and Methodology

Partnered Writing

First Grade Grace B. Luhrs University Elementary students were paired with Shippensburg University undergraduate students who were in the final stages of their teacher preparation program. The college students in an upper level literacy course met with first grade students for four 15-20 minute sessions once a week for four weeks. During these writing sessions, the university students and the first graders were paired up on a one-to-one relationship with the exception of four first graders who, due to less first graders in the class and more college students, had ratio of two college students to one first grader. Each first grader was matched with their special partner with whom they met for each of the four writing sessions. This consistency of partners allowed for relationships to grow and develop over time.

The university faculty member and first grade teacher facilitated the partnered writing sessions. Prior to the first session, the first grade teacher provided an overview of Writing Workshop in her classroom to the university students which corresponded to their college coursework topics and readings. Additionally, she provided a second session for the University students prior to their initial experience with the first graders.

Topic Selection

In most traditional Writing Workshop approaches, first grade students are invited to write about topics from a specific book or assigned a topic for the day, or week. Often these teacher selected topics are theme based or related to a specific content or curriculum goal. In Mrs. Serr's classroom, however, the Anything Writing Project was slightly different from the traditional approaches through the partnering of university students with first graders and offering free topic choice.

In the First Grade Classroom at Grace B. Luhrs University Elementary School, children are invited to write about anything of their choosing. This "Anything Writing" approach is facilitated by a step by step process which is understood by both students and the teacher and displayed in the classroom Writing Center.

Anything Writing Process

In the first step, "Step 1," students write about their idea in three parts (Beginning, Middle and End). After the first writing session, the first graders put their writing in a folder for the teacher to edit.

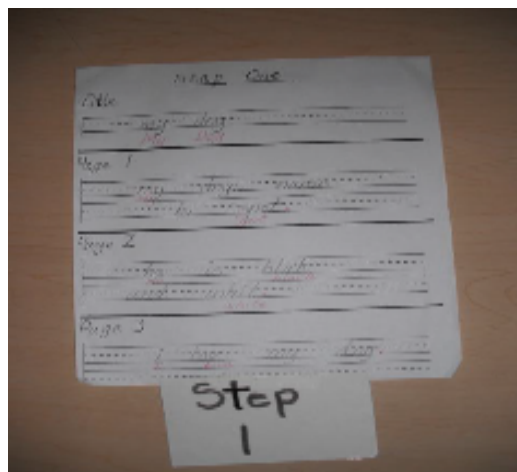


Figure 1. The teacher provides a model of the first step, Step 1 of the Anything Writing process.

The Second Step involves the teacher editing the work for sequence and clarity. This editing process also involves conversations and conferencing between the teacher and the first grader.

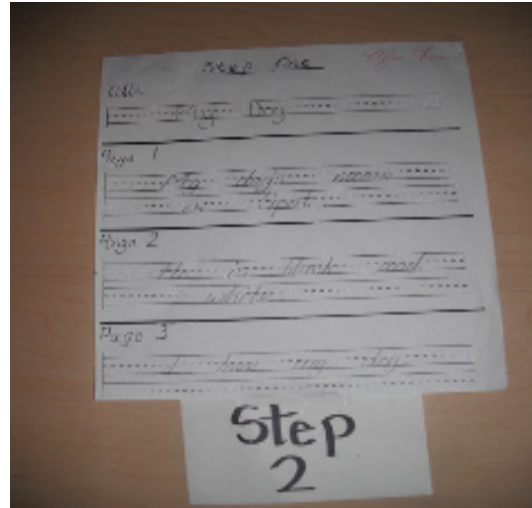


Figure 2. The classroom teacher provides a sample of Step 2 editing for the students.



Figure 3. A student author works on Step 1 and Step 2.

Certain identifying information has been changed or omitted to protect participants' anonymity. Appropriate permissions were granted for student work and photos to appear in this article.

The Third Step involves the student being invited to complete the writing in a final published version.

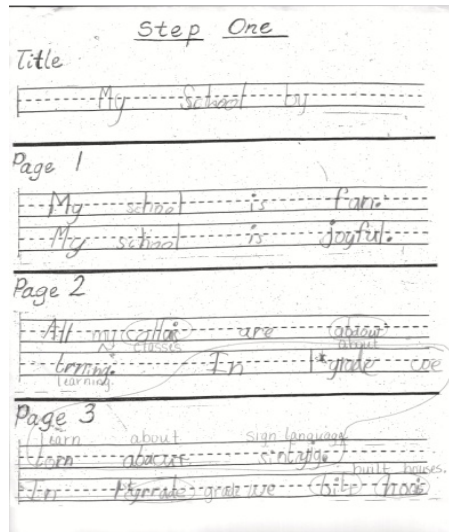


Figure 4. This student sample shows a completed Step 1 ready for the final published version.

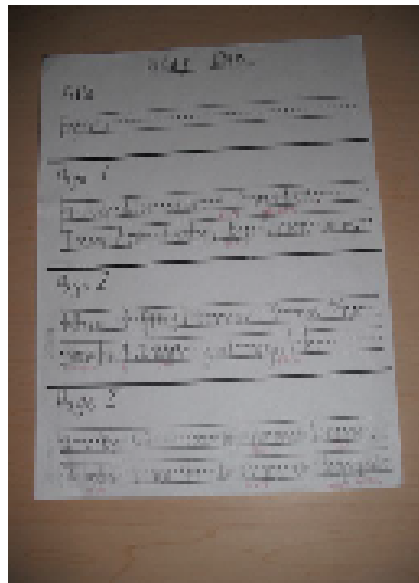


Figure 5. This student sample shows a completed Step 2 ready for the final published version.



Figure 6. This student sample shows a Step 3 completed book cover.



Figure 7. This student sample shows a Step 3 completed book page.

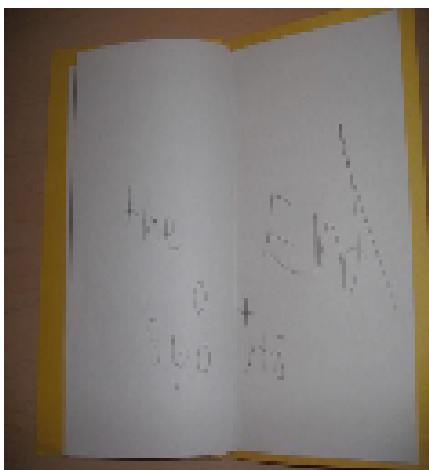


Figure 8. This student sample shows Step 3 "The End."

Observations of First Graders' Motivation and Engagement with Writing

Several approaches were used to observe levels of engagement and to show where differentiated instruction was indicated as appropriate. Observation approaches used during the "Anything Writing" project consisted of The Developmental Continuum of Writing (NWREL 1995), 6 + 1 Traits of Writing Scale (NWREL 2000) and the Writing Attitude Survey (Kear, 2000).

University students noted their observations of first grader's engagement with writing while working one on one with their assigned first grade partner. Observations were initially recorded after the third writing session and again three weeks after all of the students had published at least one book.

Developmental Writing Level

The Developmental Continuum of Writing is a descriptive scale for children which evaluates the process of writing. The Continuum provides for educators phases of writing development including scribble writing at the early preschool age up to fully developed pieces of writing usually found in upper elementary/middle grades. Attributes such as pictures being used to convey a message, left to right orientation, complexity of word choice, complete sentences, character, plot, setting, and conventions of print are included in the descriptive categories which build one upon the other to describe an evolving process of writing development.

In the Anything Writing Project data collection process, the developmental level of each of the first graders was recorded after the college partners had initially met with their student. The developmental levels were observed again three weeks after the first graders completed their final published book.

Developmental levels observed in the first grade classroom were typical of similarly aged students. There was little change noted in the Developmental Writing Level which is not surprising due to the nature of the scale which measures development over several years' time. Developmental Writing Level on the Developmental Continuum of Writing is expected to increase as a result of normal classroom involvement with reading and writing during students progression through the elementary grades.

However, there was some change in the developmental level noted from the beginning of the project to the end which was less than an academic year. Some first graders noted by the first grade teacher to be on the border of one level at the beginning of the project moved into the next developmental level by the end of the Anything Writing Project. Overall, nine students out of the twenty first graders moved up from one developmental level to the next level during the duration of the project. Additionally, two students of the nine who were noted as accomplished writers at the beginning of the project moved up two levels.

While this growth in developmental writing level might have occurred naturally, without the partnering with the university students, or free topic choice,

future observation would be needed in order to determine to what extent and degree the partnering and/or free topic choice impact the process of writing development.

6 + 1 Traits of Writing

The 6 + 1 Traits of Writing scale was developed for evaluation of the product of writing and includes the categories of Ideas, Organization, Voice, Word Choice, Sentence Fluency, Conventions, and Presentation. Each category is then rated on a 5 point scale. The 6 + 1 Traits of Writing was developed for use on longer, more developed pieces of writing by upper elementary students. For the purposes of the Anything Writing Project with the first graders, the use of this scale was modified. Only the categories of Ideas and Organization were used for the analysis of the first graders' writing.

The first graders' writing was evaluated at the beginning of the project and then again at the end of the project. The category of Ideas showed an increase in rating for most students while the category of Organization remained the same. The same nine students who advanced on the developmental scale, plus one other student, also advanced in the categories of Ideas. In the category of Ideas, the final observations of the Anything Writing Project showed 50% of the first graders had a higher rating on 6 + 1 Traits of Writing. The increase of rating in the category of Ideas is one which would be expected in a setting such as Anything Writing where individual ideas and topic choice are central. However, due to the limitations of class size and because this was the only class used in the project, a larger scale project would need to be conducted to determine the depth and impact the Anything Writing Project had on the observations of the students and the results noted when using the 6 + 1 Traits of Writing scale.

Writing Attitude Survey

The Elementary Writing Attitude Survey, developed by Donald Kear, (1990) includes 28 questions regarding elementary students' attitudes towards a variety of writing types. The survey incorporates a popular cartoon character with various expressions indicating positive, neutral or negative reactions in response to questions regarding their feelings about aspects of writing. Students select the expression which most represents themselves in regards to such items as to whether they would prefer to do homework or write a letter to a store asking to buy something, have a job writing for a newspaper, have their classmates read and respond to their writing, how they feel about poetry writing and how they feel about checking their spelling before a piece of writing is finished.

This particular survey, while indicated for use by first graders, was perhaps too lengthy and inclusive of unknown vocabulary and concepts foreign to the first graders in the project. However, there is little else, if any, to choose from when selecting an instrument to measure elementary writing attitudes. For any future observations of first graders writing attitudes participating in the Anything

Writing Project, it would be appropriate to develop an alternative survey to observe first graders' engagement and attitude about writing.

However, noting these limitations of the somewhat lengthy survey and the small size of 20 students in the study, there were notable increases in positive attitudes towards several aspects of writing.

The most striking results of the Anything Writing Project are those found in these results of the Elementary Writing Attitude Survey. 19 out of 20 students showed an increased positive attitude about writing after their book had been published. Each of the 19 students showed at least a 5% positive increase in attitude towards writing. One student increased in her positive attitude from responding positively to 60% of the items on the survey at the beginning of the project to responding positively to 81% of the items which is an overall 21% growth in positive attitude towards writing. Only one student remained unchanged in attitude about writing. For a closer look at the individual items and categories on the Elementary Writing Attitude Survey, specific results follow.

There was a 25% increase (5 students) in the number of students who responded positively to the idea of writing a letter to a store and to the idea of having a classmate read their writing.

There was a 20% increase (4 students) in positive attitude towards writing about what happens in one's own life and having classmates talk about what makes writing better. Poetry and writing for a newspaper also showed a 20% increase.

15% of the students (3 students) increased in attitude on writing about why something happened, writing in a diary or journal, choosing writing over homework, writing an advertisement, story, report, or writing questions for social studies or science.

10% of the students (2 students) increased in their attitudes towards writing an author letter, letter of opinion, being an author, being a better writer, choosing a new topic, changing their writing, and wanting to write more.

5% or 1 student increased in wanting to try writing from another point of view.

Notably, there was no increased interest for any student in the area of checking their writing to make sure that the words were correctly spelled. This is fairly typical for first graders, and, perhaps even those of us who are older writers!

Writing Attitude Survey and Overall Summary of Results

Overall, the most prominent items where students' attitudes were positively increased were not merely the types of writing, but involved relational qualities. The items having the most positive increase involved audience and audience response, but not just an unknown audience. The items measuring the first graders attitudes regarding classmates reading and responding to their writing showed positive increase in attitude at the highest observed levels.

While the survey incorporates different types of writing, purposes of writing and audience responses, the overwhelming increase in attitude falls into the category of audience response in the Anything Writing Project. It is perhaps a result of the Anything Writing Project and due to the comfort zone created by the university student partnerships. The first graders demonstrated a more positive attitude towards having someone else, as well as their teacher, in their class reading and responding to their writing.

Observations by University Students

In some cases, University students noted that their first grade students were comfortable with the writing process and had completed their first book by the second writing session. For other first graders, University students noted some students received guided encouragement to begin writing about anything of their choice.

Lisa and Angelica

Angelica observed that while Lisa was not quite ready to put her thoughts in writing in the first session, by the time Lisa's book was published, she was very proud of her work and enthusiastic about sharing it.

Josh and Felicia

In another example, Felicia noted that Josh seemed to be interested in writing about his trip, but just couldn't get started. Mrs. Serr suggested that maybe Josh be allowed to bring something from home to get the ideas flowing. Josh brought in a favorite toy and used that as his topic choice for writing after much oral discussion with Felicia about the toy and its significance for him. Felicia noted that Josh was very excited about writing on the day he brought his toy.

Differentiated Instruction Observation

Overall, many University students wrote and commented about their observations that first graders' interest in writing increased over the course of the writing sessions. In addition, University students had the opportunity to observe experiences using differentiated instruction. Barbara was paired with a child with specific needs. Barbara observed that it was important to have patience and willingness to move with the child's needs rather than pushing forward to complete a writing project at the expense of the child's needs.

Outcomes

The one-on-one partnering with the university students and the first grade students resulted in the first grade students becoming more excited about and engaged with writing than they had demonstrated previously in the year. This was seen through the Elementary Writing Attitude Survey. Of additional note, the number of final books published by the first graders were greater than that of the previous class of first graders who had also participated in the "Anything Writing" Writing Workshop but without the university partners. Konnie noted

that she filled more crates with published books after the Anything Writing Project than she had with any previous year's first grade class.

The university students had a more in-depth understanding of an innovative approach to Writing Workshop and differentiated instruction that went beyond lectures, and textbook reading. This was noted in university students' written reflections of the experience. University student Lexi reflected on the writing process and how the Anything Writing process impacts not only the students' writing, but the relationships within the classroom. Lexi observed that it was important to develop a relationship with the first graders where students felt comfortable with the writing process and with responding to one another about writing.

Wearing the university faculty hat, Stephanie noted that the university undergraduate students gained a very realistic experience about teaching writing to first graders. Often beginning teachers will assign students to write a story, give a certain amount of time, and expect students to complete the story by the end of the first session. With the "Anything Writing" project, university students gained a full understanding of what it means to embark on a writing project and that the project will probably not be completed in one session.

Implications

This observational study provides a model for faculty, classroom teacher and pre-service teacher involvement with Writing Workshop. The triangular model keeps the first graders at the center of instruction. In addition, this "Anything Writing" Writing Workshop provides an example of how first grade students can receive the scaffolding they need within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) while at the same time caring deeply and having ownership about their writing (Van Manen, 1990).

As observed previously, the Anything Writing process involves much conversation and relationship building. While this process was accomplished by partnering university students with the first graders, Mrs. Serr has been operating solo by communicating and building writing relationships with her first graders for a number of years.

The Anything Writing Project with university partners allowed for this particular first grade class to have multiple opportunities for communicating about writing which resulted in a faster turnaround for publishing books than if only one teacher were working with twenty students. The Anything Writing process can be replicated with or without partnering, but it is our belief that the results obtained in this particular project were positively impacted by the one-on-one partnering of the first graders with the university students. This collaboration can best be represented by a pyramid of support surrounding the first grade students.

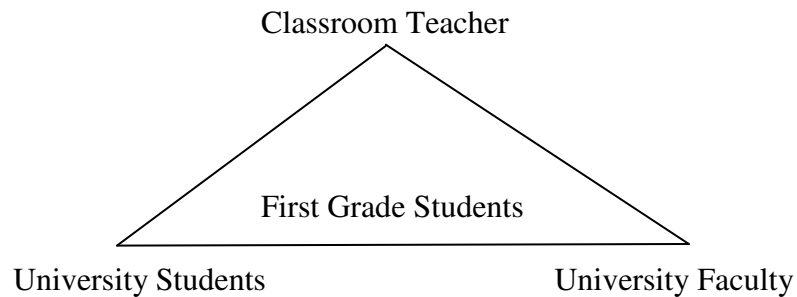


Figure 9. The collaborative relationship in the “Anything Writing” process.

The present day high-stakes testing which focuses on students writing about an assigned topic within a specific time frame results in a whole-class focus of writing instruction. The all too common “one-size fits all” model of writing instruction found in some classrooms today perhaps does not provide the classroom teacher the opportunities for creative writing, topic exploration and the opportunity for differentiated instruction in writing as found in the “Anything Writing” Writing Workshop model.

Additional Thoughts

The “Anything Writing” approach is an open invitation for elementary students to write within their safe zone of topic choices, experiences and developmental time frame. This model can be replicated with university affiliated or laboratory schools seeking to create authentic writing experiences for elementary students and university students.

For schools without access to university partnerships, the “Anything Writing” Writing Workshop model could still be implemented with modifications by the classroom teacher and through partnering with other community partners. Perhaps high school students, parents or retired community members could provide the partnership component with similar results. In fact, classroom buddies with older upper grade students would also offer opportunities for conversations about writing projects.

It is our hope as facilitators and observers, that teachers and university students and students in all elementary classrooms across the country can be involved in classroom environments that provide such writing opportunities as found in the Anything Writing Project.

Ongoing Reflections

After the conclusion of the project, our thoughts began to sift, sort and clarify the experiences that had taken place during the project. We began conversations that didn’t necessarily focus only on writing. Our conversations included phrases like, “Did you see when the first graders didn’t want to leave their partners and go to recess?”, or, “He was so engaged during that last session!” or, “The partners had

such a good time joking around together!” As we continue to reflect on the partnered writing experience, the partner piece is what rises to and beyond the surface.

Final Thoughts

While the first graders and university students learned about writing together and increased their academic knowledge, there was something equally, if not more important taking place. The children and university students began bonding and forming a relationship built around the common purpose of writing. The relationship was authentic, and, in the mind of the first graders, very real and identifiable.

When another group of adults came to tour the school, one first grader asked, “But Mrs. Serr, where is my college writing partner?” As Konnie (Mrs. Serr) has noted, “Many college students come and go, but these relationships were special. When my students requested to see the university students and say good bye, that showed me how very important it was for them (the first graders) to have closure.” The first graders did in fact “go to college” and visited their university partners during the last week of the term. The university students were especially touched by the visit which was accompanied by precious thank you cards, pictures, and high fives.

As teachers in the process of creating “lived meaning” (Van Manen, 1990) we have appreciated the opportunities to partner our students, even for the brief sessions that were able to be scheduled, amidst the normal complications of the university and elementary school calendars.

The authors would like to acknowledge Grace B. Luhrs University Elementary School teachers, staff and students, Dr. Philip Diller, previous Director, GBLUES, Dr. James Johnson Dean of The College of Education and Human Services, Dr. Barbara Lyman, Provost, and the SU Foundation, all from Shippensburg University, Shippensburg, Pennsylvania. Also thanks to the NALS, 2009 Annual Conference.

This project was approved through Shippensburg University. Human Subjects IRB process.

At the time of this collaborative project, Stephanie J. Koplitz Harty served as an Assistant Professor at Shippensburg University. Currently, she works with local school districts and college students in the area of literacy.

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