

Creating Reading Excitement Through Character Dialogue Journals

BY JEAN BULLER

Active learning is not just for elementary school children. It is also vital for college students. In training student teachers, my philosophy has always been "doing is better than just telling." As I struggled to adequately convey the essentials of the reading and writing process, I thought, What better way than to have my student teachers actively communicate with children—their future clients?

For character dialogue journals, older students, in my case student teachers, assume the role of a character in literature. They regularly correspond with younger students about events and people the children meet through reading. This gives student teachers firsthand insights into children's thinking and writing, and allows them to practice writing from someone else's viewpoint.

Writing in response to literature helps students better understand what they have read. Mason and Au¹ encourage students to use open-ended writing to explore their own reactions of a story, including their feelings and uncertainties. "Students learn to respond to literature by having their ideas and feelings accepted and shaped by other readers, including more experienced ones, such as their teachers," according to Mason and Au.²

Tierney, Readence, and Dishner advocate the use of dialogue journals "to provide students an opportunity to share privately in writing their reactions, questions, and concerns about school experiences (and sometimes personal matters) with the teacher

without any threat of reprisal or evaluation."³ Use of these journals also enhances fluency and teacher feedback, and creates counseling opportunities.

Getting Started

Character dialogue journals require little preparation or materials. Finding a willing teacher as a partner is the first step. The classroom teacher must compile a list of the books his or her children are reading. These could include books the children have read in the past, or that have been read to them by teachers or parents. Usually 10 to 12 books are appropriate for a single classroom. The stories chosen should feature interesting characters whose experiences are relevant to the students' lives. They should include both males and females from different time periods and settings, and even some fictional characters that have worthy values or experiences. Richness of vocabulary and use of language, along with an intriguing plot are also important considerations.⁴ The literature chosen should be consistent with Seventh-day Adventist standards and the concerns of the local community.

After the list is agreed upon by both the elementary teacher and college teacher, student teachers are given copies of the student books to read during the next week. The student teachers also receive colored pocket folders. On these folders student teachers print the character's name and create a setting that invites children to read. For Mabel, in *Stories From Grandma's Attic*, my students created a folder covered with buttons representing her button collection. Helen Keller's folder

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featured a landscape scene created from various textures (sponge, sandpaper, straws) so students could increase their learning through touch. Ramona, from Beverly Cleary's *Ramona the Brave*, had a portrait on her folder. A castle on the folder for Little Christian, from *Little Pilgrim's Progress*, brought his experience to life.

Folders are covered with clear contact paper to preserve them. Inside is a letter of introduction written by the student teacher. I encourage them to immerse themselves in their roles and then, assuming those roles, describe themselves, their families, friends, and pets; to write about favorites, likes and dislikes, books and school, and things they enjoy doing during the day. Most important, they must ask questions that stimulate responses.

Writing Schedules

Students should correspond regularly—through weekly exchanges, if possible. The third graders heard about the character journals on Friday morning. They could write to the characters until Tuesday when the journals were collected and returned to student teachers. By Thursday afternoon student teachers were required to respond with another entry. Thus, by Friday morning the journals were back into the third-grade classroom. This exchange continued for approximately eight weeks. A longer period would have been ideal, but the college schedule imposed time limits.

Children could write to any character they chose, but often they would write again and again to the same character, having “bonded” with a favorite. Some characters received more responses than others. Occasionally, there were even three-way conversations between several classmates and a character. The classroom teacher made sure that all children were regularly involved.

What Do They Like to Talk About?

Student teachers tried to engage the third graders in conversations about daily experiences.

- “Laura” from *Little House on the Prairie* described her family and her home. She asked students to tell about their families and pets.

- “Mabel” (*Stories From Grandma's Attic*) reminisced about the time she warmed her clothes in the oven and burnt them to a crisp. She asked if someone had ever done something silly that turned into

a disaster.

- “Eeyore” from Winnie-the-Pooh stories was usually in a “down” mood and was constantly asking students how he could be happier.

- Quite often “Winnie-the-Pooh” talked about his friends and asked children what they liked to do with their friends.

- “Almanzo” from *Farmer Boy* asked children questions about their life at school.

- “Little Christian” sought consolation when his friends teased him about

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The author, in costume, meets one of her young correspondents.

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wanting to follow God.

Children usually responded directly to their character's questions. One child described the game of two-square as if talking to a foreigner. Another relived having chicken pox, staying awake at night because of itching. One student described the mischief he and his brother caused by making a “bomb” in their house. Often students would share stories of loneliness or crying themselves to sleep because a friend was angry at them. One girl offered comfort to Little Christian by reminding him of her memory verse, “I will be with you always.”

Children enjoyed asking questions, too. To Ramona, “Did that feel good when the kids were making fun of you?” and to Winnie-the-Pooh, “Do you like peanut butter and honey sandwiches?” Almanzo was asked if he was a sissy and if he would send a sample of his hair. Sometimes student teachers were asked questions they could not answer. They would try to locate birthdays, names of pets, or favorite subjects by researching other materials. If they could not find an authentic answer, they created one they felt was consistent with the character's personality.

Children bonded with the lead character from Jack London's *White Fang* by communicating through his master. They

Dear white Fang

my name is chrisy. (kris-ee) I know you cant
 Read so I made my name easy to
 Read. well anyway you should have your
 master Read this letter to you. now to
 answer your questions. I saw the Fangs
 in the back of this Jarnel and I know
 what prey is. it is a animal that you
 chase.

now to give you some questions to answer
 how fast can you run?
 Do you like cats?
 whats the most danrous sichtigung that
 you have ever been in?
 have you ever seen a tiger?
 whase your girl friend?

Example of children's journal writing.

focused on animal traits by asking: Does White Fang like cats or chickens? Does he chase them? The response: White Fang likes them, but he is not allowed to chase them. He obeys because his love for his master is stronger than his love for cats or chickens!

The pockets in the folders allowed for an exchange of special gifts: stickers, bookmarks, homemade toys, a picture to cheer Eeyore, a paper honeypot for Pooh, seeds from Almanzo's sowing, an item for Helen Keller to feel and identify, or a riddle to be solved by Henry Huggins (from Beverly Cleary's book by the same name).

The last entries in the journals were made by the student teachers. They told about themselves in real life, and shared how much they had enjoyed writing to the children.

Culminating Activity

To close the character journal experience, we scheduled a one-hour joint lesson with a face-to-face meeting. This lesson was planned by the college teacher and the

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classroom teacher. Some student teachers came dressed in character. Others carried an object or artifact, or wore a name tag identifying the character they represented. The children created appropriate costumes for a secondary character in the story, and wrote a riddle so student teachers could "Guess Who I Am."

When all characters had been identified, the student teachers met with one or two children in small groups (prearranged by the classroom teacher). The student teachers had prepared treasure chests and paper shapes ahead of time. They wrote on the small paper shapes the names of

artifacts from the story that would remind the children of significant events (a newspaper, a blue ribbon, Christian's burden). These shapes were placed in paper treasure chests. The completed treasure chests were placed in the back pocket of the journal.

With the help of the student teachers, the children decorated a T-shirt they had brought from home. This reminded them of the story they enjoyed. It also gave the elementary teacher adult assistance in an art project that would have been overwhelming for one teacher to manage. Refreshments provided by room mothers added a festive touch.

In Conclusion

Everyone involved enjoys a character journal project, especially the children. If journals arrive late on Friday morning, children express their disappointment. Parents savor the excitement they see in their children's responses. Teachers find it helps motivate children to write and read, and student teachers get to experience firsthand the kinds of activities they will organize some day.

This project can be quite easily adapted to multigrade classrooms. The crucial element is protecting the identity of the older students as character writers. This will require special planning if all writers are in the same classroom. Character dialogue journals can also combine upper and lower grades or academies and elementary schools.

Minimal materials and only a few copies of books are needed for character dialogue journals. Trade books and decorated folders with writing paper are essential, but most schools already have these. Time for reading and writing is already part of the school curriculum. All that is really required is the willingness to be creative and an attitude of adventure. The result is reading and writing that students can hardly wait for!

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Jana M. Mason and Kathryn M. Au, *Reading Instruction for Today* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman/Little, Brown Higher Education, 1990).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
3. Robert J. Tierney, John E. Readence, and Earnest K. Dishner, *Reading Strategies and Practices, A Compendium* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1990), p. 96.
4. Mason and Au.