



Dialogue Journals

Dear Reader,

Now we move into the yearlong uses of written discussions for teaching the curriculum. In this chapter, we start simple and straightforward, with written conversations between just two people. This natural (and accountable) letter-writing structure has time-tested value, and it builds the base for larger, more complex discussions later.

Smokey and Elaine

“Dialogue journals get every single student ‘talking,’ and thus can replace low-participation whole-class discussions.”

DEFINITION: Dialogue journals are written conversations between just two people, one-to-one, like pen pals. The pair can be the teacher and a student or two students. Dialogues can be done “live,” as quick exchanges during class, or as “takeaways,” longer, more leisurely letters written and answered at the correspondents’ convenience. Dialogue journals get every single student “talking,” and thus can replace low-participation whole-class discussions. At the same time, dialogue journals keep the complexity low. It’s just two people, completely accountable to each other, without the exponentially more complex dynamics of larger groups.

VARIATIONS:

- Teacher-Student Dialogues
- Student-Student Dialogues
- Dialogue Across the Curriculum: Math, Foreign Language, Social Studies
- Feedback Loops
 - Student-Teacher Assessments
 - Behavior Support Letters
 - Student Self-Assessments
 - Kid-Kid Assessments
- Teacher Response to Student Writing
- Multi-Age Dialogue Journals

ORIGINS: You might be interested to hear that the school use of dialogue journals was pioneered by deaf educators in the 1960s and 1970s. Led by researcher Jana Staton, teachers of kids who were hearing-impaired exchanged notes with their students as a logical accommodation to the learners’ communication needs. We treasure some copies of mid-1980s mimeographed newsletters from the Center for Applied Linguistics, where Staton and colleagues developed this powerful tool.

Later, the idea was picked up by regular educators, and popularized especially by Nancie Atwell in her groundbreaking 1987 work *In The Middle: Reading and Writing With Adolescents*. Atwell’s students regularly exchanged “literature letters”—responses to their independent reading—with both their teacher and

a student partner. All this history helps us understand why “dialogue journals” are sometimes thought of as primarily student-teacher correspondence, even though the kid-kid version is also widely used today, and featured heavily here.

QUICK LOOK:

While early in the year we use paired writing to build personal acquaintance and support, academic applications take over quickly. One classic use of dialogue journals is for partners to thoughtfully discuss *texts they are reading*—novels, stories, articles, essays, historic documents, scientific articles, math problems, or any other curriculum materials.

In Sonja Kosan’s middle school class, she’s introducing dialogue journals for the very first time. After explaining the process and pairing kids up, she reads aloud the grown-up picture book *The Wednesday Surprise* by Eve Bunting (which we visited with Joyce Sanchez on page 55). After hearing this sweet story of adult illiteracy, Matt and John take their first-ever shot at dialogue journals, with Mrs. K timing everyone’s letter exchanges.



Photo courtesy of Comstock.

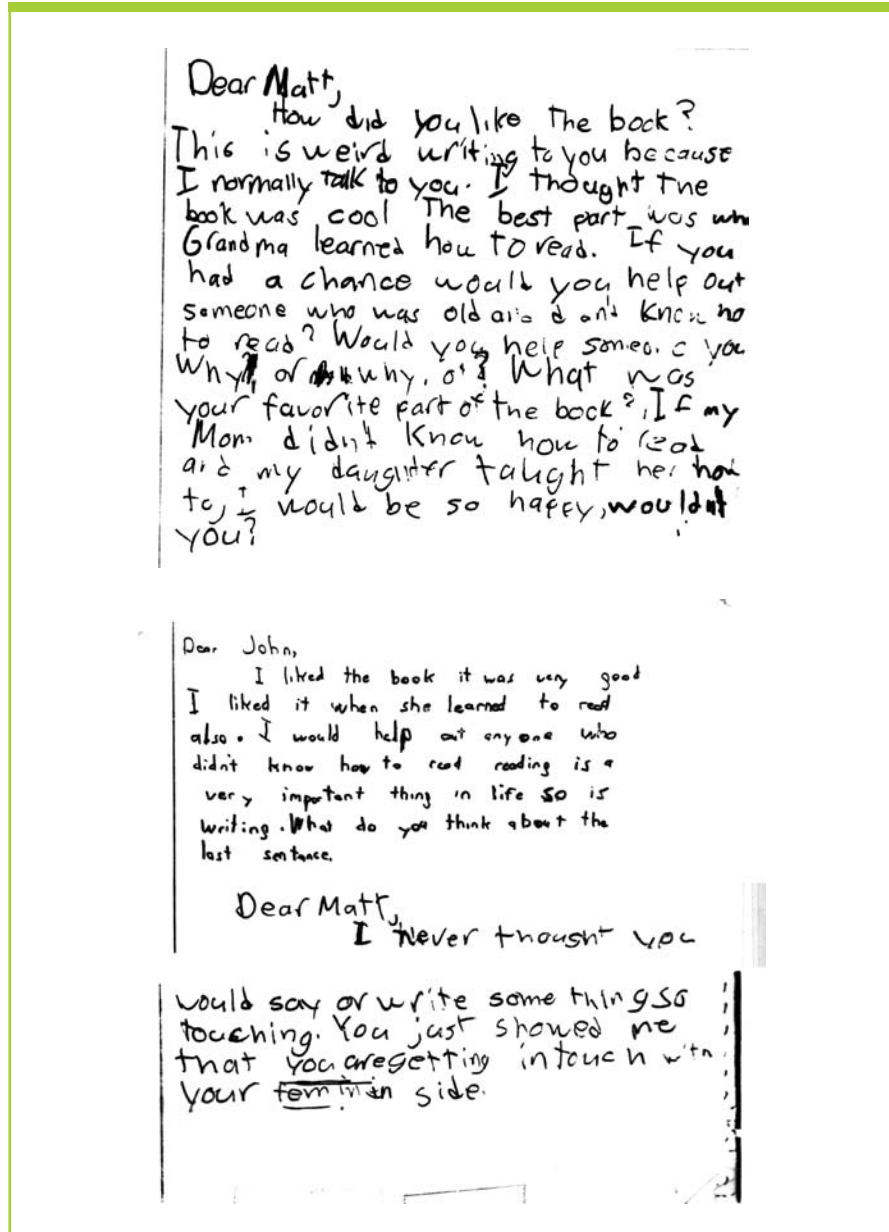


Figure 4.1

While the boys are obviously suffering some first-time jitters (and Matt could use some punctuation), they've discovered a good strategy for keeping the conversation going: Throw out some good, open-ended questions, and then chew on them with your partner. That's how you get in touch with your feminine side.

Once partners have exchanged notes twice, Sonja invites them to continue the discussion of *The Wednesday Surprise* out loud for a few minutes. Finally, she convenes the whole class and asks for volunteer pairs to share one theme, thread, or topic of their conversations. Inside of 10 minutes, every student in the class has joined in a thoughtful discussion of a piece of literature—and many are eager to go public with their thinking.

LAUNCHING LESSON:

Imagine that a group of actors has come to your school this afternoon to put on a short play about the life of Abraham Lincoln. You lead your fifth graders down to the auditorium, get them seated in the correct rows, and keep an eagle eye for inattentive behavior. But the play is engaging, and the kids eat it up. Then it's off to the buses, and home for the night.

The next morning, as the kids file in, what do you do? Bubbling up from the cellular level, your teacher DNA impels you to commence a *whole-class discussion*. You instinctively ask, “So, you guys, what did you think about the play yesterday?” If you happen to be a first-grade teacher, every hand in the room will now shoot up, though most of the proffered comments turn out to be “I don’t remember what I was going to say” or are unrelated to the play.

In any case, this eagerness to join in class discussions declines steeply by grade level. In most classrooms, a couple of hands go up, and other kids look blank. Thus begins the age-old school ritual in which a fraction of students speak up, and the majority sit, ignore, drift, sleep, or actively avoid participating. Since only one person can talk at once, the 29 other folks in the room can only listen the vast majority of the time. There’s almost no positive social pressure on the majority of students to join in. And we wonder why kids say school is “boring.”

But what if *everyone* talked about the Lincoln play? Of course, we can always put kids in groups to discuss the play, which works very nicely when kids are

trained in the social skills of small-group discussion. But even then, if we split the class into a handful of groups, we still have perhaps five speakers and 25 listeners at a time. And there's no way to be sure that students actually stay on the topic.

So when the thespians rolled through her school, fifth-grade teacher Jane Cook took a different route. First she formed kids into pairs and had them pull out a blank sheet of paper and a pencil. Then she said,

Today, we're going to talk about the play we saw yesterday, but instead of discussing it in the whole class out loud, one at a time, we're going to talk about the play with one buddy each, in writing. How can we do that? We are going to write short letters to our buddies about the play, and then pass them back and forth, like mail. Sound like fun? I'll tell you more in a minute—for now, everyone needs a partner. So come up and grab a Popsicle stick out of our partner jar and see who your buddy will be today. Sit down together and both of you get out a full-size blank sheet of paper. I'll give you a minute.

OK, everybody settled? So we're going to write letters to each other about the Lincoln play—but they are going to be really short. We're only going to write for one minute, and then we are going to trade papers. What do you do when you get a letter? Right, you read it! Then what? Of course, you write back. So that's what we are going to do right now. When we pass these letters, you'll read what your pal wrote, and right underneath where they stopped, you'll write them back an answer. But this will go fast. We'll write and pass three or four times. You just keep writing, and I will keep time for you.

Finally, what are you going to write about? See this list I have projected here? You may have lots of things that you remember about the play that you can't wait to talk about. If that's the case, go for it. But if you need a little reminder or a topic to give you a quick

start on your letter-writing, you can use one of these topics. I will leave them up.

- What you liked about the play
- What you thought about the people in Lincoln’s family
- How you liked the acting, scenery, or costumes
- What facts you learned about Abraham Lincoln
- What questions you still have
- Anything else that comes to mind as you think back on the performance yesterday

This will be something fun and different. Everyone gets to talk—you don’t have to raise your hand. And just so you know, I will be collecting these when we are done to see what you’ve talked about.

Ready? Let’s write letters!

As kids write, Jane circulates through the room, looking over shoulders and gauging kids’ progress. About every minute and a half, she instructs kids to finish the sentence they are currently working on, and then tells them to exchange papers. Then, their job is to read what their buddy has written, and respond, right under wherever their partner left off writing, keeping the conversation going. She reminds kids that they can respond, comment, connect, compare, debate a point, or shift to another play-related topic. “Just keep the conversation going,” she encourages.



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One pair of kids wrote this:

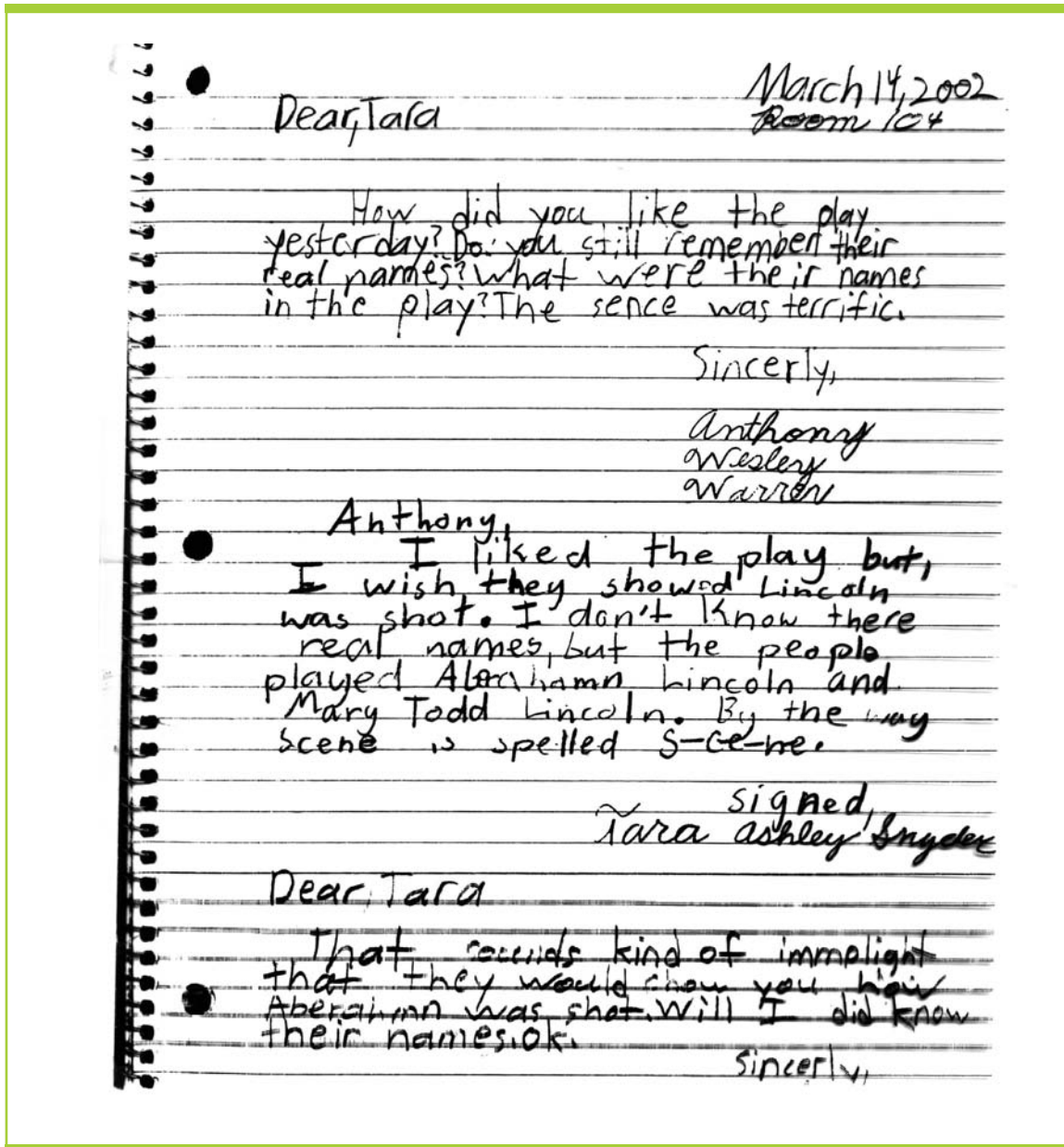
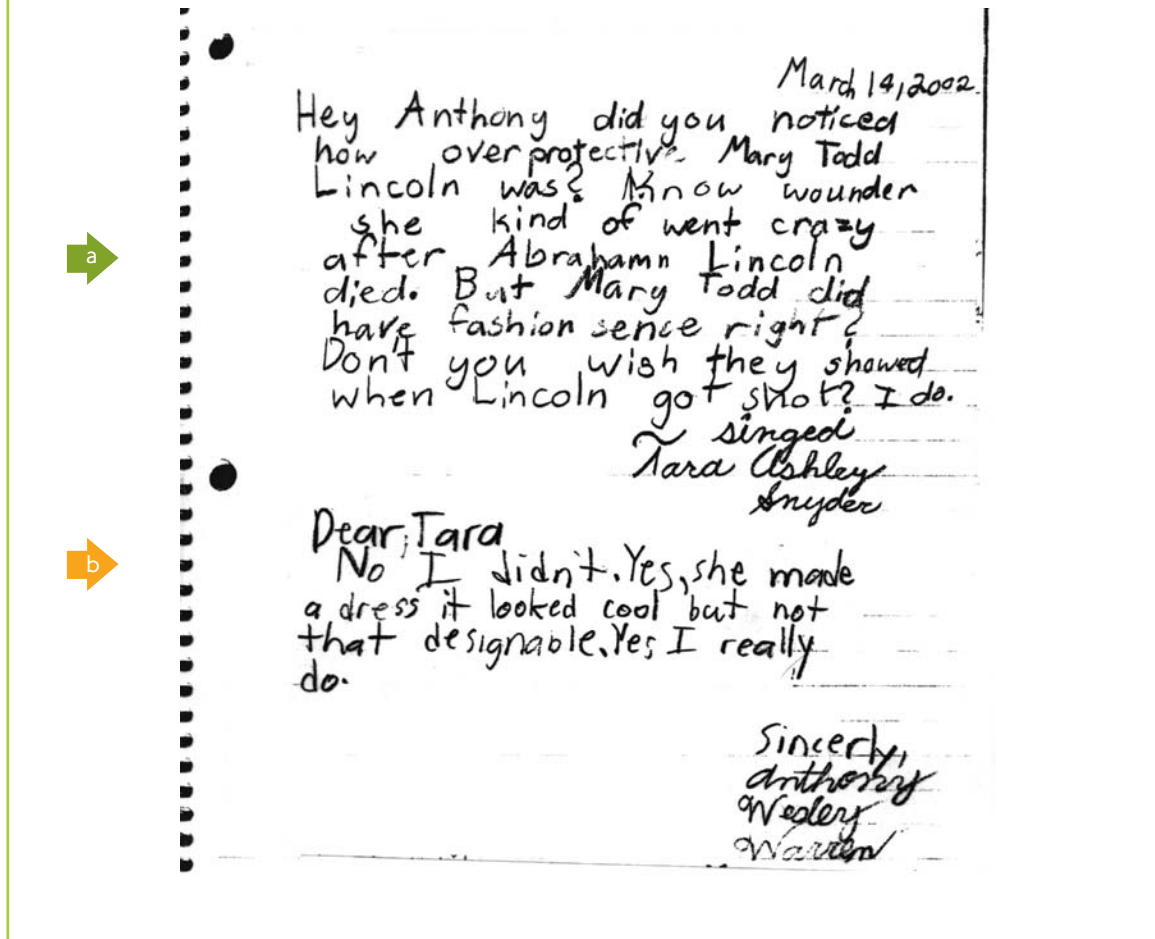


Figure 4.2 (continued)

Figure 4.2 (continued)



Mary Todd Lincoln was shown sewing during the play.

Figure 4.2



Here you might think that Anthony has gone completely off the rails, until you look up and notice that he is answering Tara's questions one by one. We suspect that his final agreement that, yes, the play should have included Lincoln's fatal shooting may not be wholehearted.

Most importantly, if you had walked into the room while kids were writing these notes back and forth, you would have been struck by the fact *that every single kid in the room* was either writing or reading about the play for about eight solid minutes. Every kid—no sleepers, no slackers.

This reminds us: If you want engagement, you can have it. You just have to use the classroom structures that trigger active learning instead of stifling it, as lectures can. Written conversations make it easy for everyone, bold or shy, to participate.

GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS FOR “LIVE” DIALOGUE JOURNALS

Below are the instructions as we tell them to kids:

- Sit next to your chosen or assigned partner. Get in a good position for both writing and talking, and be sure you can still see any materials I project on the screen. *This might include the instructions for this activity, a list of possible letter-starter phrases, or text or an image that is the subject of the writing.*
- Everyone please get a full-size blank piece of paper ready to use. Put your name in the upper left-hand margin. Then, just below your name, write a “salutation” to your partner, as in “Dear . . .” Now you are ready to have a dialogue journal with your pal.
- As we write letters, please follow these rules:
 1. Use your best handwriting so your partner can understand you.
 2. Don’t worry about spelling and grammar. Just get your thoughts out.
 3. Draw pictures, diagrams, or cartoons if that helps you make your point.
 4. Use all the time I give you for writing. Keep that pen moving until I tell you to exchange papers.
 5. No talking. This is a silent activity.
- Papers ready? OK. You are all going to write your buddy a letter on our topic, and then “mail it” by exchanging notes. You are both going to be writing letters at the same time. You’re not waiting or watching your partner—you’re both writing all the time. It’ll make sense in a minute!

The writing time will be pretty short, just about one or two minutes per letter. I’ll give you a warning when there are 15 seconds left each time.
- Go ahead and write your partner about your thoughts, reactions, questions, or feelings about our topic. *The topic can be any common experience: a story, poem, nonfiction article, lab experiment, or textbook selection. If you want to be sure that all kids can get started writing promptly, you may decide to project four or five possible “safety net” starter stems (e.g., “One thing I am wondering is . . .”), but remove these after the first note-passing so kids can then focus on responding to their partner’s ideas. For a list of useful writing prompts, both general and subject specific, see pages 66–69.*

Keep time not by exact minutes and seconds, but by walking and watching kids write. When most students have filled a quarter of a page, it is time to pass.

- OK, time to “mail your letters.” Exchange with your partner. Now read your buddy’s note, and think about it a little bit. Then, just beneath their letter, write back for . . . minutes. You can tell your reaction, make a comment, ask questions, share a connection you’ve made, agree or disagree, or raise a whole new idea. Just keep the conversation going! *Walk the room, looking over shoulders to get the timing right.*

- Pass again, please. Repeat and continue. *Usually three or four notes is just right. Don’t time this activity by actual minutes, but by watching how kids are coming and by calling “Pass” only when most people have written at least a few lines.*

OPTIONAL SHARING OUT: Sometimes, these pair conversations, just like out-loud turn-and-talks, have inherent value and needn’t be shared or debriefed (and we can always collect them, of course). But other times, we want to use the thinking from dialogue journals to advance the curricular work at hand.

- Let’s gather as a whole class and see what new learning or questions came out of this dialogue journaling. Will a few pairs please share one highlight, one thread of your discussion? Something you spent time on, something that sparked lively discussion, maybe something you argued or laughed or wondered about? *And now you can connect kids’ comments to the subject under study.*

ADJUSTMENTS FOR “TAKEAWAY” DIALOGUE JOURNALS

- Live dialogue journals, as described above, are usually done by the whole class at once, with the teacher doing the timing, and the letters being written, received, and answered immediately. Kind of like texting. Takeaway dialogue journals are more leisurely, and operate more like regular letters or emails.

- Kids write their partner a note when their schedule permits (sometimes as homework), taking whatever time they need to offer a thoughtful missive. Typically, these notes are longer and more carefully composed than speedy live dialogue journals. They are “mailed” by simple hand delivery, via email, or by placing them in the partner’s classroom mailbox—a system that teachers who use this strategy often set up.

- Recipients answer dialogue journals when they have time to think about and thoughtfully respond to their partner’s notes. They return them through the same channel they arrived.

- These “takeaway” dialogue journals sometimes go on for weeks or longer. Many teachers start these more sustained conversations a bit later in the year, allowing students to request their own long-term partners.



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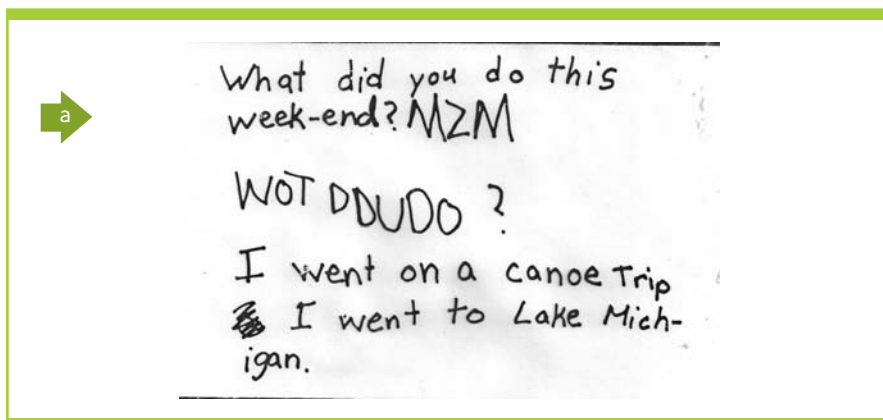
TEACHER-STUDENT DIALOGUES

Purpose: When teachers correspond with individual students, they can offer a carefully targeted personal “conference” that guides learning.

Literacy instruction changed forever in American schools when the “workshop” model came into wide use. At the core of workshop is the one-to-one conference, where the teacher regularly sits down to coach each young reader and writer, face-to-face, for a few minutes. These quick individual meetings are so valuable that we move heaven and earth to make them possible.

A commitment to conferring requires highly efficient classroom management and training; if you are having a private conference with one kid, what are the other 29 class members doing?

For primary-age kids, one of the most valuable written dialogues we can initiate is when we sit down beside one child, with a blank sheet of paper and one pen in front of us. Here, Sarah’s teacher initiates a written conversation by writing a question—and vocalizing it as the words go down on the page—“What did you do this weekend?” Then she hands Sarah the pen and invites her to respond. They go back and forth for a while, sharing one pen.



Sarah says “Museum. What did you do?”

Figure 4.3

There's a lot going on in this special dialogue: The teacher is modeling adult text, and Sarah is watching it go down on the page. Both parties are fully engaged since the topic is mutually agreed upon. The trick is to find time to do this with every student in a classroom! But this kind of written dialogue can easily be taught to aides, parents, and older kids, so it doesn't always have to be the teacher doing the one-on-one.

Nancie Atwell showed many of us how written dialogues can potentiate great book talks between teachers and individual students. Though her examples came from the middle grades, the idea comfortably stretches down to kindergarten and up through high school. Here, Susan Smith's third graders have just read a short article about Martin Luther King. Now she asks kids to write her a note in response. Here's what Pam shared.

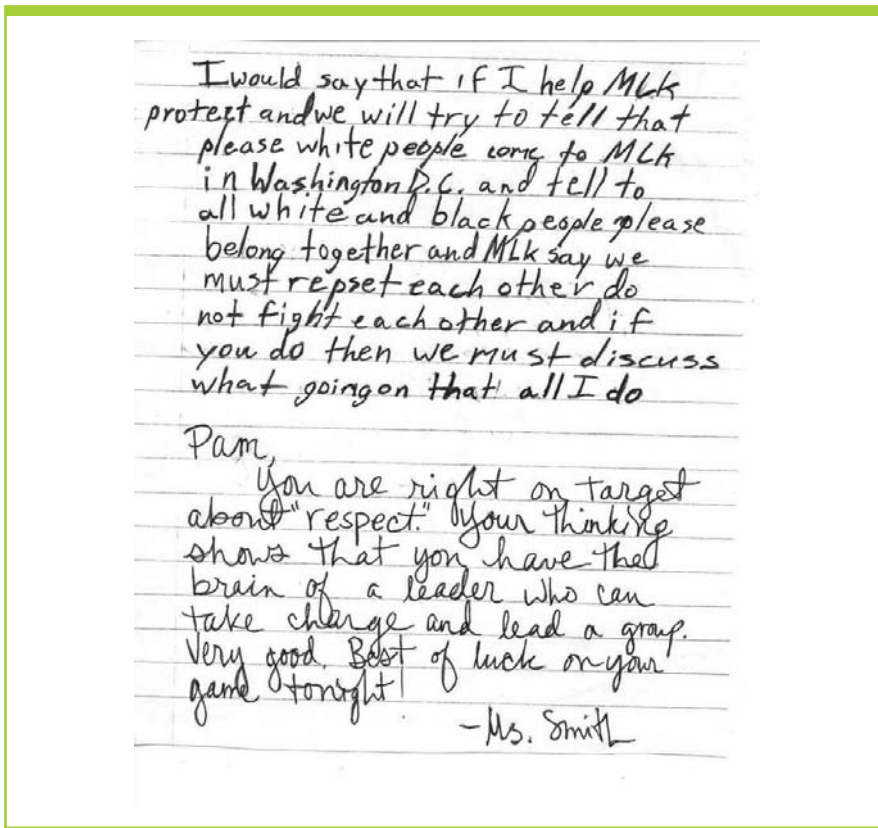


Figure 4.4

“We are never done building friendliness and support in our classrooms.”

Notice how Susan not only gives Pam some supportive feedback on the curricular topic, but also shows personal interest by wishing Pam well in her upcoming game. We are never done building friendliness and support in our classrooms.

In her special education class, Kelly Beauchamp uses dialogue journals to support her kids’ reading. After reading aloud *Verdi* by Janell Cannon, Kelly had this written conversation with Andrea about the story—and about journaling itself.

Dear Mrs. Beauchamp,

I love this story because it is like a life cycle and life cycle is where it goes like a generation.

Andrea

Dear Andrea,

That is so true and I am so proud of you for making that connection. Kind of like I am in another generation than you, but I still like to dance and have fun.

Mrs B

Dear Mrs. Beauchamp,

Verdi was a very good story to read and conect to and maybe this will help me reading better cause it helps on reading, writing, and thinking.

Andrea

Dear Andrea,

You are going to make me cry! I am so proud of you for realizing that this lesson can help us all be better readers, writers, and thinkers.

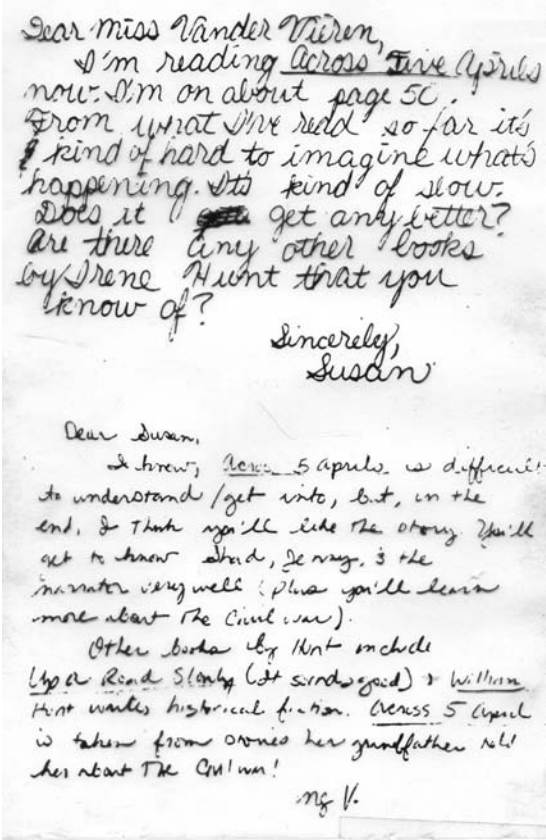
Mrs. B

Dear Mrs. Beauchamp,

I loved it and I think we need to do this on everything we read. The story I loved it and it also means never give up—in case your age but if you want to change it is your decision not theirs! And I think you’re doing a good job! You are the greatest teacher in the world! You are pretty or cute in your own way.

Andrea

As with Kelly and Andrea, teacher-student dialogues can be quick, one-time events. Or, they can become the very fiber of classroom life all year long. Seventh-grade teacher Jill Vander Viren maintains regular “takeaway” dialogue journals among herself and her young readers.



The image shows two handwritten letters. The top letter is from Susan to Miss Vander Viren, dated Five Aprils. Susan asks if the book is hard to read and if there are other books by Irene Hunt. The bottom letter is from Ms. V to Susan, dated 5 Aprils. Ms. V explains the difficulty of the book and recommends other books by Hunt.

Dear Miss Vander Viren,
I'm reading Across Five Aprils now. I'm on about page 50. From what I've read so far it's kind of hard to imagine what's happening. It's kind of slow. Does it ~~get~~ get any better? Are there any other books by Irene Hunt that you know of?
Sincerely,
Susan

Dear Miss Vander Viren,
I'm reading Across Five Aprils now. I'm on about page 50. From what I've read so far it's kind of hard to imagine what's happening. It's kind of slow. Does it get any better? Are there any other books by Irene Hunt that you know of?
Sincerely,
Susan

Dear Susan,
I know, Across Five Aprils is difficult to understand/get into, but, in the end, I think you'll like the story. You'll get to know Shad, Jeremy, & the narrator very well (plus you'll learn more about the Civil War).
Other books by Hunt include Up a Road Slowly (it sounds good) & William. Hunt writes historical fiction. Across Five Aprils is taken from stories her grandfather told her about the Civil War!
Ms. V.

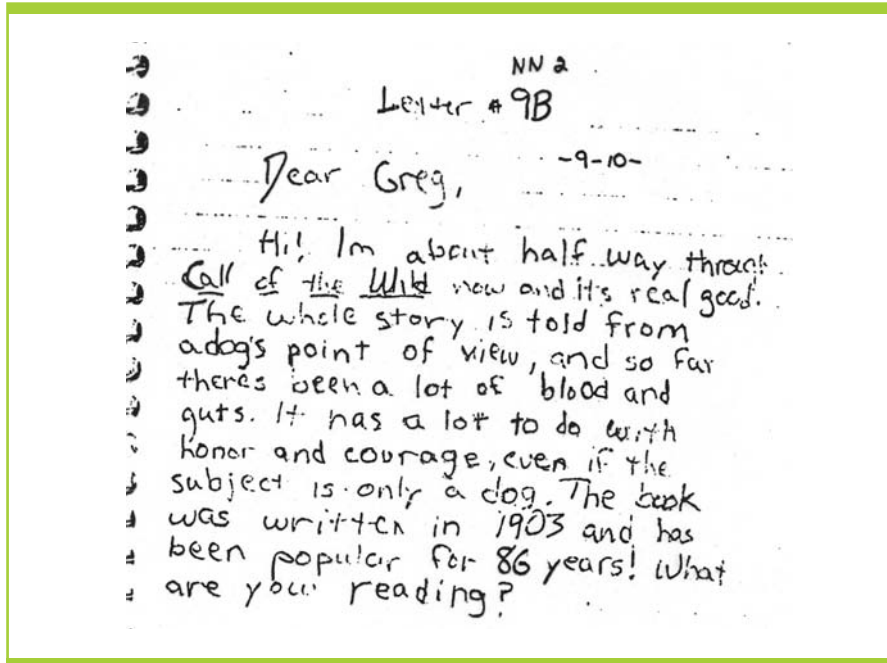
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Teachers sometimes worry about saying “the right thing” when they respond to student letters. But, as Jill’s answer shows, the real job is just to be authentic and relevant. Here, Jill simply offers some support and background info to a student who’s struggling to get into a novel.

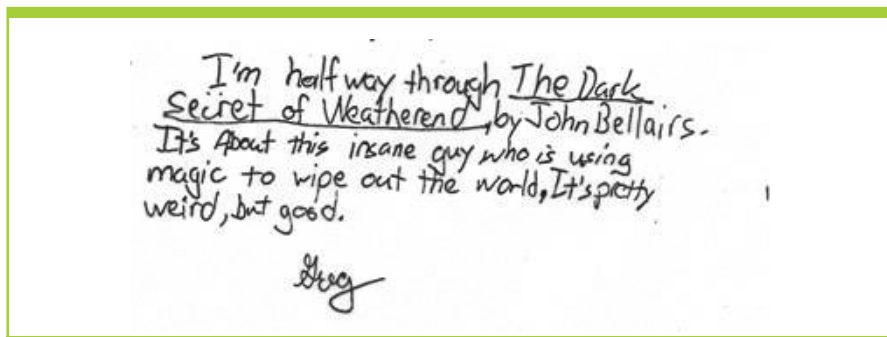
Figure 4.5

While Jill writes weekly notes to each student, every kid is also matched up with a student partner, and they exchange literature letters on the same schedule. Greg and Doug are staying in touch with each other, and with Ms. Vander Viren, as they work their way through some books.

A photograph of a handwritten letter on lined paper. The letter is written in black ink and is addressed to Greg. It discusses the book 'Call of the Wild' and asks Greg what he is reading. The paper has a vertical margin line on the left side with small arrows pointing to the right.

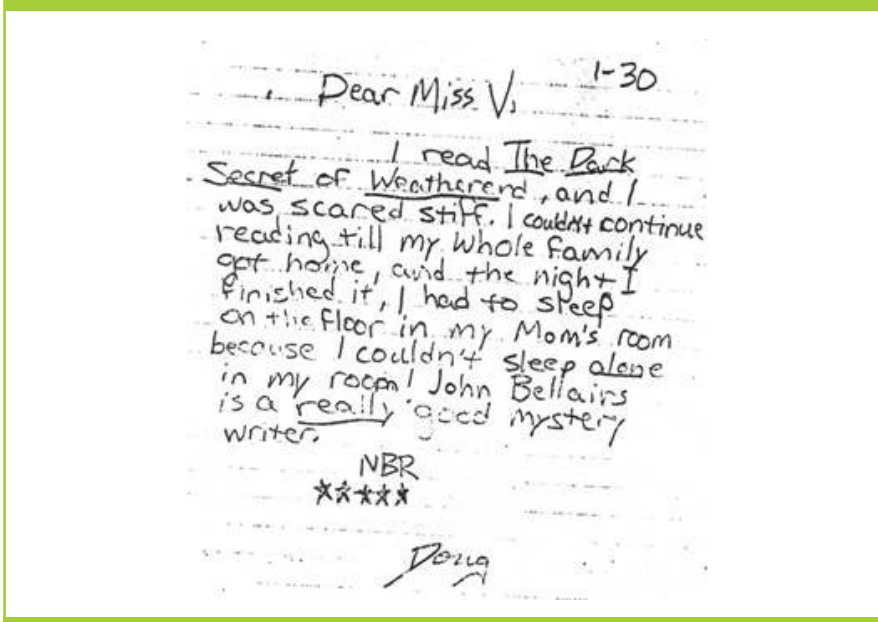
NN 2
Letter # 9B
-9-10-
Dear Greg,
Hi! I'm about half way through
Call of the Wild now and it's real good.
The whole story is told from
a dog's point of view, and so far
there's been a lot of blood and
guts. It has a lot to do with
honor and courage, even if the
subject is only a dog. The book
was written in 1903 and has
been popular for 86 years! What
are you reading?

Figure 4.6

A photograph of a handwritten note on lined paper. The note is written in black ink and describes the book 'The Dark Secret of Weatherend' by John Bellairs. It is signed 'Doug' at the bottom. The paper has a vertical margin line on the left side with small arrows pointing to the right.

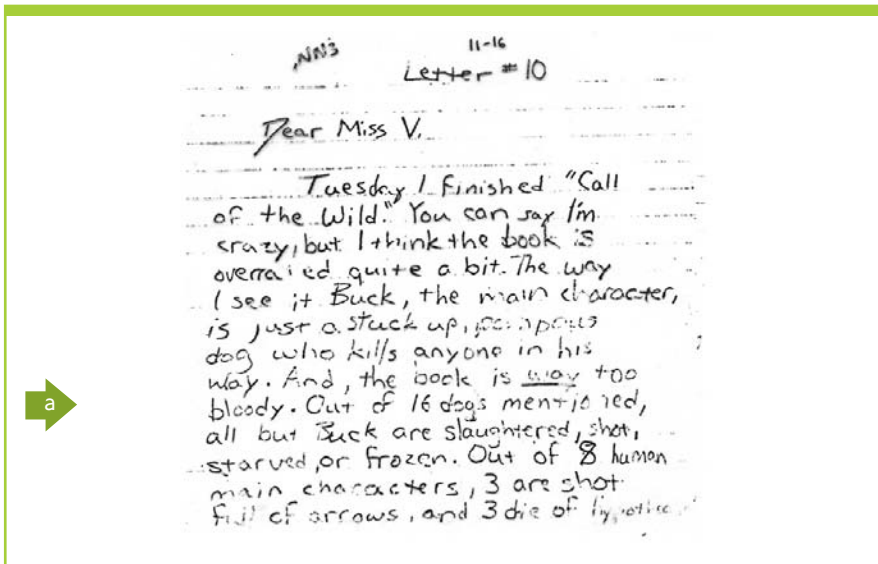
I'm half way through The Dark
Secret of Weatherend by John Bellairs.
It's about this insane guy who is using
magic to wipe out the world. It's pretty
weird, but good.
Doug

Figure 4.7



Jill's kids enjoy making up their own book-rating star systems, just like the grown-up critics. Here Doug Nelson has created the NBR (Nelson Book Rating) guide.

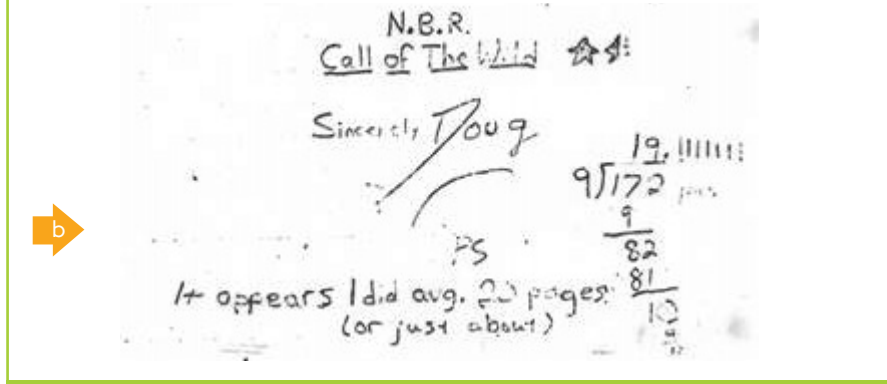
Figure 4.8



Talk about textual evidence! Doug really delivers the proof that Jack London's classic is über-violent. And then he only gives it one and a half stars. Snap!

Figure 4.9 (continued)

Figure 4.9 (continued)



b

b

Here, Doug is calculating his pages-per-day reading rate.

Figure 4.9



Photo courtesy of Creatas.

Mary Ellen and Erin were already enthusiastic readers, and their letters developed into a fierce but fictional book-reviewer rivalry. At one point Erin suggested that they go into the library, cover their eyes, and pick a book to read at random. Having accepted this arbitrary challenge, Mary Ellen fired off the mock-outraged riposte on the facing page:

Dear Erin,

Boy would I like to ~~but~~ you
1 ? Never again ~~would~~ ^{will} I ever
pick a book off the shelves with my
eyes closed. But, for my honor's
sake - I read, painfully, The House
of Seven Gables. It took me 3 long,
long, boring days to read this
long, boring book. I will never again
dare to loan this title's name without
getting out. This book is definitely not
for our age group + not on my top
list. I give Nathaniel Hawthorne's
House of Seven Gables a $\frac{1}{2}$. (half one star).

Mary "Eliot"

P.S. - read in peace. (well maybe not
you!!)

P.P.S. - ~~this~~ ^{what} was pure torture!!!

(H3)

Notice that Mary Ellen actually read *The House of Seven Gables* in just three days! And hated it. But for a reader as voracious as she is, that's simply too long to spend on any one book.

Figure 4.10

Dear Mary Ellen,

You must broaden your horizons! The House of Seven Gables will enrich you, and someday you will thank me for making you read it!

Read in Peace!

Love,

Erin

P.S. I own all rights to the phrase "Read in Peace!"

It is copyrighted under patent number 2,654,953,711. Any copying, duplication, or reproducing of said phrase is prohibited and offenders will be prosecuted by law. Any time it is written, it can and will be used against you in a court of law! Good day!

a

a

Bring on the lawyers!

Figure 4.11

- bull! On the said Oct. 19, to whom Kuma
received a letter which ended ~~the~~
controversial phrase "I bid you peace"
"Read in Peace" → are = + the same
to which I own the rights of. You
in fact, took the phrase "I bid you
peace" from a letter I wrote to you +
started using "Read in Peace". So don't
give me that, Erin. I know you!!!

I bid you peace & Read in Peace have
absolutely nothing to do with each other!
"I bid you peace" is yours, "Read in Peace" is mine.
END OF DISCUSSION.

Figure 4.12

Jill was convulsed over this exchange.

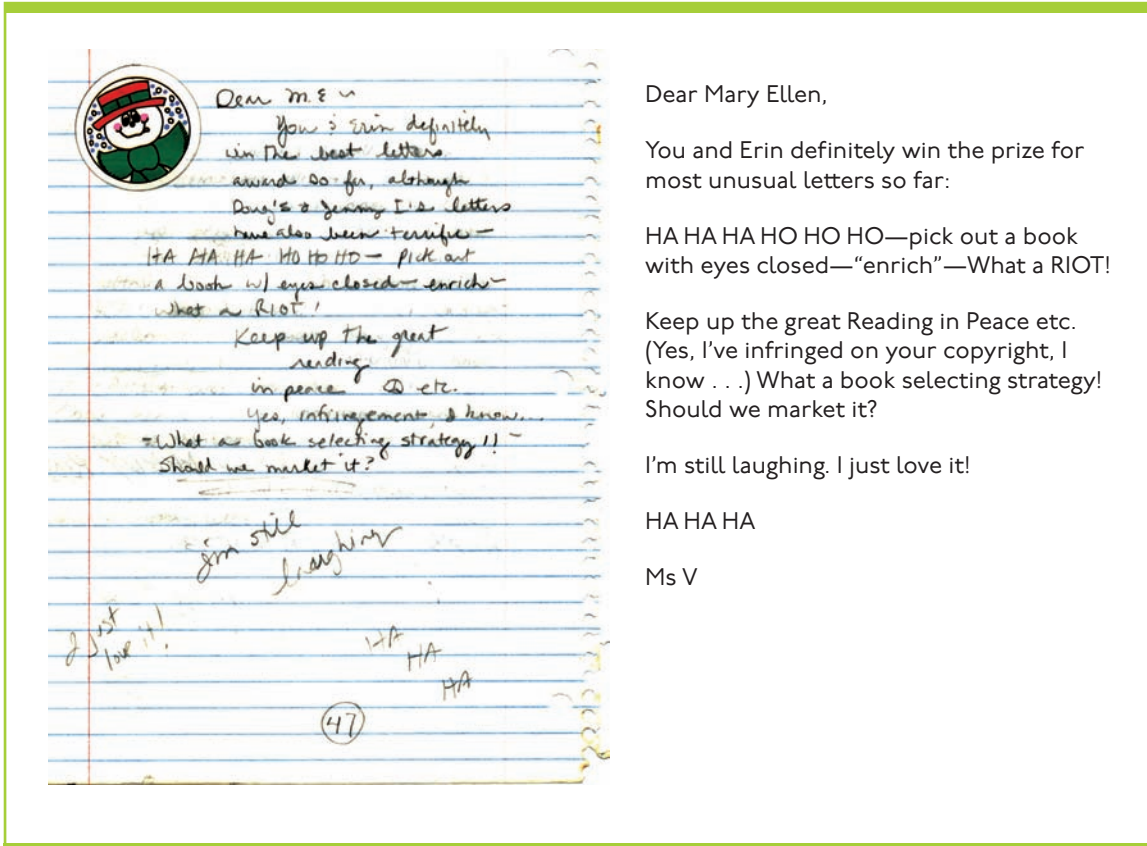


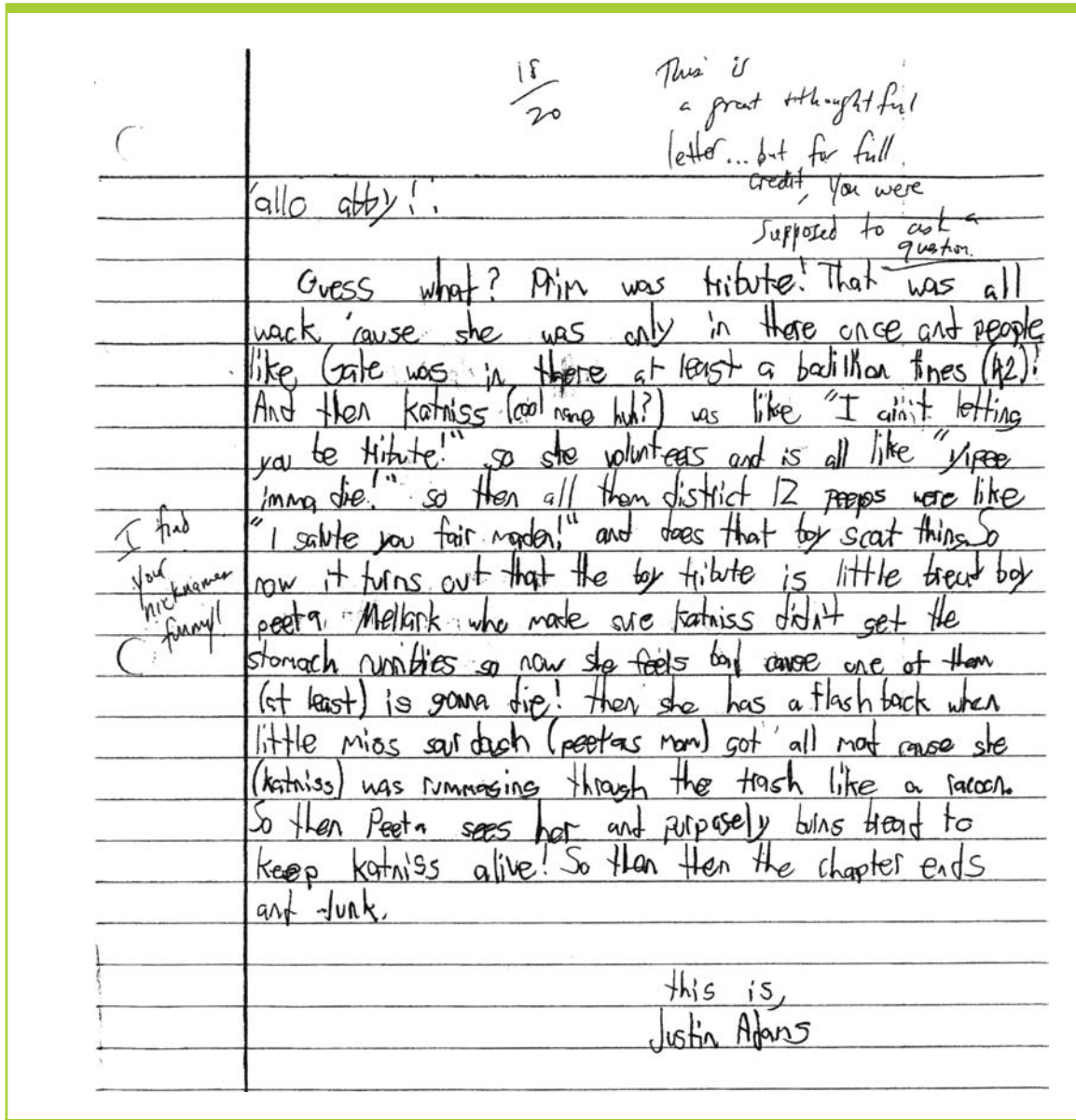
Figure 4.13

STUDENT-STUDENT DIALOGUES

Purpose: When pairs of students engage in “live” written conversations during class, everyone has a chance to engage, think, react, respond, and question the subject matter.

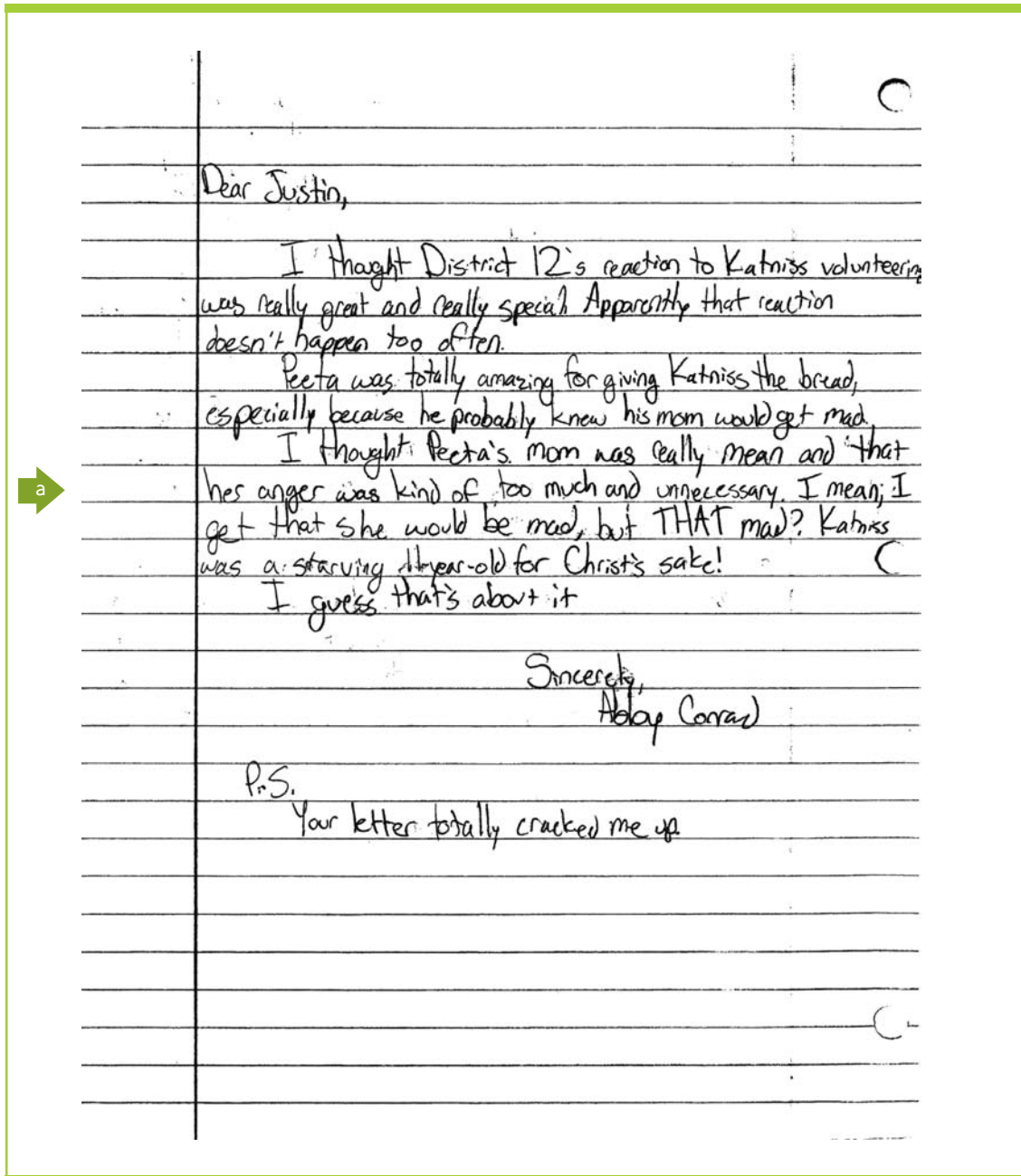
The big payoff with dialogue journals comes when kids are writing to each other, not just to us. A natural time for dialogue journals is while students are reading a whole novel or nonfiction book.

Our colleague Erin Ripple at Federal Hocking High School asked her freshmen to have a written conversation about the opening pages of *The Hunger Games*.



In addition to being a clever character piece, Justin's letter also offers a solid plot summary of the first few chapters.

Figure 4.14



More good textual evidence and a critical character appraisal.

Figure 4.15

Justin's letter is truly a tour de force of faux gangsterese. If you find something funnier, please send it to us immediately. Meanwhile, Erin still has her game face on, enforcing the requirement that you have to pose at least one question for full credit.

TWO MEANS TWO

We have both done this a thousand times: Tell students to “grab a partner,” and then plunge into some pair activity without making sure that kids are really two by two. Have you done this? And seen some kids pick one partner, some pick two, some pick none, and some pick five? Obviously if we fail to police this, we get asymmetrical groups that will be having totally different experiences as the activity unfolds. The solo kids will have no one to talk to, the kids in oversized groups won't get enough airtime or accountability, and so forth.

So we have to be tough—and do the math. When you put a class of kids in pairs there are only two possible outcomes. Either everyone has one partner, or there is just one singleton left over. That person can become the teacher's partner or a member of the only group of three that's allowed to form.

Elaine: In my class this year we've been doing a lot of reading about identity and sense of self, both personally and culturally. It occurred to me that investigating the word and concept “macho” with my New Mexican students might be a worthwhile endeavor. In this two-stage process, I first asked them what they thought the word *macho* meant to them. In this conversation between Ria and Cody are echoes from a previous discussion on what “abuse” means.



Ria: Macho: A Man who thinks he is powerful/strong mentally and physically. A man who thinks he has the upper hand in anything or anyone.

Cody: I think your description of macho is a good one. I agree because a macho man would want everything done his way. They want



Preconceived notions of what “macho” means surfaced here. A word prevalent in American culture comes into focus in this conversation.

control of everyone around them. If someone has control, then the macho man sees that as a threat. I think you are a very strong woman for leaving a situation like that. I can't even begin to imagine what you went through, but you got through it. And I'm happy you have. I love you!

Ria: I'm not sorry I told you.

After this “flip-flop” conversation, I gave them an excerpt from an article “I’m the King’: The Macho Image” by Rudolfo Anaya, one of our finest local and national writers. The article focuses on the word *macho* itself and the historical meanings of the word and concept. A key passage reads

Drunkenness, abusing women, raising hell (all elements of la vida loca) are some mistaken conceptions of what macho means . . . young men acting contrary to the good of their community have not yet learned the real essence of maleness.

Here’s how some students responded to Anaya’s thoughts, and to each other:

Dear Girardo,

It has changed my opinion because what Rudolfo Anaya said about macho being a learned behavior and it being misunderstood as any aspect of hispanic/Latino culture. It is a mistaken concept of drunkenness, abusing women, and raising hell. It is a negative behavior aped by a new generation.

Dear John,

To me I still think macho is someone who acts tough because it’s all I’ve seen it as. I’ve never been told or showed macho can be a good thing till now after having read this article. It’s going to take some time for me to switch my views about Macho. To me macho ain’t much. To act Puro (“real”) is better. Act yourself and you got nothing to prove.

Dear Girardo,

I saw macho as a more negative word for me. But your list and the article gave me a different look on the word. I would have to say that my great



grandfather was one of the most macho men I ever knew. He was very respectful, honest, open-hearted, hard-working and always provided for my grandmother and the kids no matter what.



Here Girardo and John delve further into their concepts of “macho” after reading the Anaya article.

In their conversations, my mostly Hispanic and Native students really resonated with this issue. And many of them seemed to be thinking hard about Anaya’s assertion that “young men acting contrary to the good of their community have not yet learned the real essence of maleness.”

DIALOGUE JOURNALS ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Purpose: When students are studying math, science, social studies, or any other school subject, paired written conversations allow everyone to join in the thinking.

Math

We most frequently see dialogue journals being used in language arts or English classes, and that’s a missed opportunity. The structure is an equally powerful way to get kids thinking in any content area. At Federal Hocking High School in Stewart, Ohio, teacher Sue Collins routinely uses written conversation to help students practice mathematical thinking. Here’s one assignment she presented:

Solve the following equation, show all the steps, and check your solution.

$$-2x + 7 = 11$$

Solve the following inequality, show all the steps, and check your solution.

$$-2x + 7 \leq 11$$

When you have finished solving and checking your solutions, have a dialogue journal with your partner, comparing and contrasting the processes and the solutions to the equation and the inequality.

Here are some of the dialogues kids wrote during the last step of the assignment:

Pair 1

I noticed that these two problems were similar because most of both of the problems followed the same rules.

I noticed that too, but the inequality had some extra rules.

Yeah you know you have a good point.

I noticed the difference in these problems was that for the second one the check is a little bit harder 'cause unlike #1 you have to check by using two #'s.

Yeah, but it was still easy for me to remember the rules of it.

Well, it's harder for me because I am a tad bit slower in learning, but I get your drift.

Pair 2

The equation and inequality involved all the same numbers. You ended up subtracting 7 from 11 on both problems. But the equation you have only one answer and the inequality you have a lot of answers. The 1st check was easier. 😊

I like this part. . . . I never thought of that . . . other than that we wrote the same thing.

Yeah, I didn't think about the checks being different. But other than that we wrote the exactly same stuff. Smarty pants!

Yep, I'm hungry. There is nothing else to write.

Pair 3

The difference between two inequalities were that in the first one only one answer could be right and the second one any number greater than -2 was right.

The first problem was an equation, not an inequality!

Oh so what! You know what I meant!

No, actually I was like “what is she talking about?” Get it right Lauren! They are different. You get an answer with an equation and a bunch of possible answers with an inequality. You use a graph with an inequality like this.

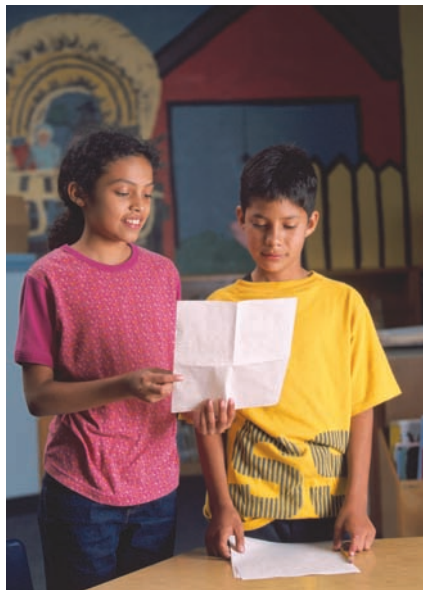
You’re a jerk!

Am not! Just smart.

Once again, we’d point out the mixture of good thinking, reflection, and playfulness in these notes. The kids are on-topic for sure—but the personal connection, banter, and humor help sustain energy for the work.

Foreign Language

For many years, smart foreign language teachers have been inviting pairs of students to practice the target language in short partner conversations like these. The rule is to write in the new language the best you can; when you come to a vocab item you don’t know, just plug in the English word and carry on.



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¡Hola Derek, porque tu el fútbol americano
equipo es muy malo?

~~Porque~~ ~~Star Miceli~~.

Porque Star Miceli es muy mal, et no inteligente.

Por que ~~tu estas~~ ~~en~~ tu estas el músculos
pequeño?

¡Mi músculos es dos talla tu músculos.
¿Tu quieres la lucha libre varsity?

Si, quiero la lucha libre varsity, et tu, tu quieres
la lucha libre varsity, en lunas contra Grays Lake et
Lake Zurich?

Si, yo ~~soy~~ voy la lucha libre varsity? ~~es~~
La lucha libre practicar es muy ~~es~~
~~de~~ cansado, no.

Si, que pear Mahru tengo un problema ~~de~~ de la
pierna.

¡Adios Derek!

Adios A.J. ~~yo voy~~ yo voy a practicar hoy

Los muchachos se divierten en practicando español!

Figure 4.16

Often foreign language teachers have kids doing these conversations right at the start of class, as a warm-up to the target language.

Social Studies

Sara Ahmed's seventh-grade history class is studying freedom of speech and censorship. For a contemporary example, Sara has brought in articles about a recent controversy in Arizona. For many years, high schools in Tucson offered a special course about Hispanic and Chicano history in the Southwest. Among other outcomes, graduates of this class scored higher on college entrance exams than did other students in the school. But while nonminority students could and did enroll in this course, some politicians came to see it as subversive and racially polarizing. A battle ensued, which ended with the course being abolished and its texts removed from the schools. Not exactly a book burning, but pretty close.

Sara invited Louis Urrea, one of the designers of the course, to visit her classroom and tell his side of the story. After his presentation, Sara suggested that kids jot down their reactions individually. Though she's a big user of dialogues, Sara hadn't set this writing up with partners. No matter, Athee and Loren got into it on their own (see Figure 4.17).

The gestalt? A pretty lively conversation, with arrows, rejoinders, bullet points—and a school of fish swimming through the middle! Not so easy to read, though. Here's a transcription of how the writing went down, as best Athee and Loren could reconstruct the sequence.

Athee

Student B

ARIZONA BOOK BAN REFLECTION

Social Studies (p. 5)

It is stupid, idiotic, and ironic that people think Louis Urrea is trying to brainwash innocent teenage civilians. It teaches them of their culture! Their very existence. Would you take that away from a kid? I think not. How would you feel if someone took away your identity or culture? That's what America is supposed to be opposed to, right? It's a silly thought, pathetic really. I don't care if they are conservatives or liberals. It's just so racist I can't believe it.

Isn't it more helpful for kids in AMERICA to learn American history? What if it's less about taking away culture and more about teaching where they live?

A culture is a parent's job to pass on. The "devils advocate." Fighting for a side that I'm opposed to is what I mean by devil's advocate." Depends. A school should be focused on the history kids really need. Yeah but they can take culture electives.

Why waste money on a parent's job? Electives cost. Put this money elsewhere!

Nobody said anything about brainwashing, don't try to use false accusations for the other side to look bad. This is not a court case. This does not mean that it's not worth being polite and not accusing people of having supernatural powers.

How does anything think anyone is "brainwashing?" You are brainwashed! Explain. How? Why? Stop the logical fallacies!

This argument is very fishy (draws a string of fish across the page).

And it's not so bad that they put kids in JAIL.

Do you have any information on WHY they were not put in jail? Inform me what the police said. Where did they protest? How? When? Without this I don't know if it was just.

It wasn't, they just wanted their classes. The man who boxed these books hasn't been to 1 class to see.

Looking back on their discussion, the kids sent this email for us teacher-readers to consider.

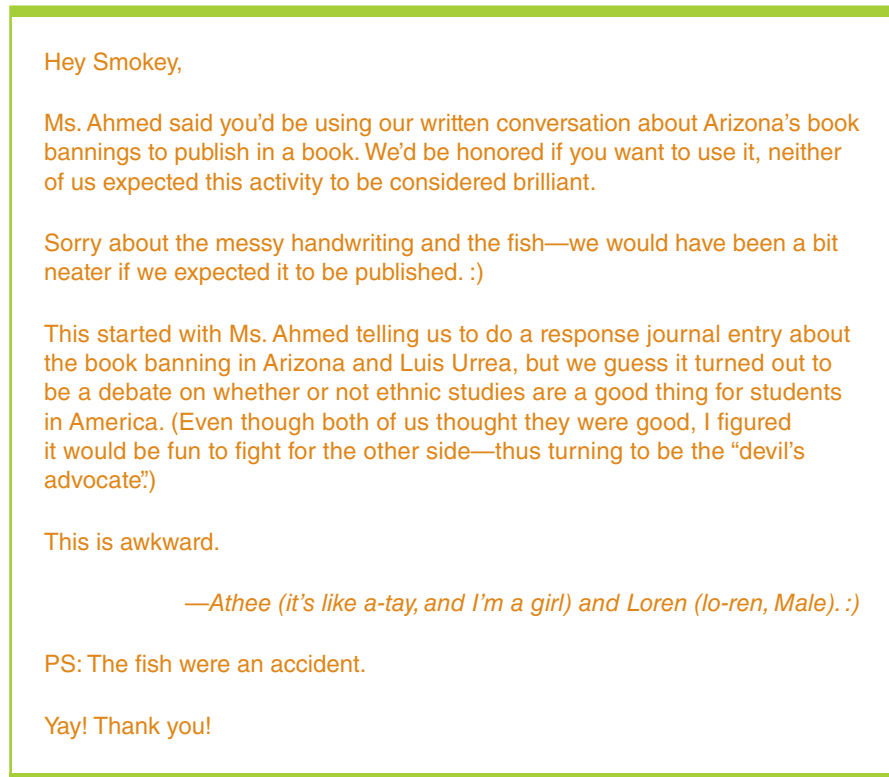


Figure 4.18

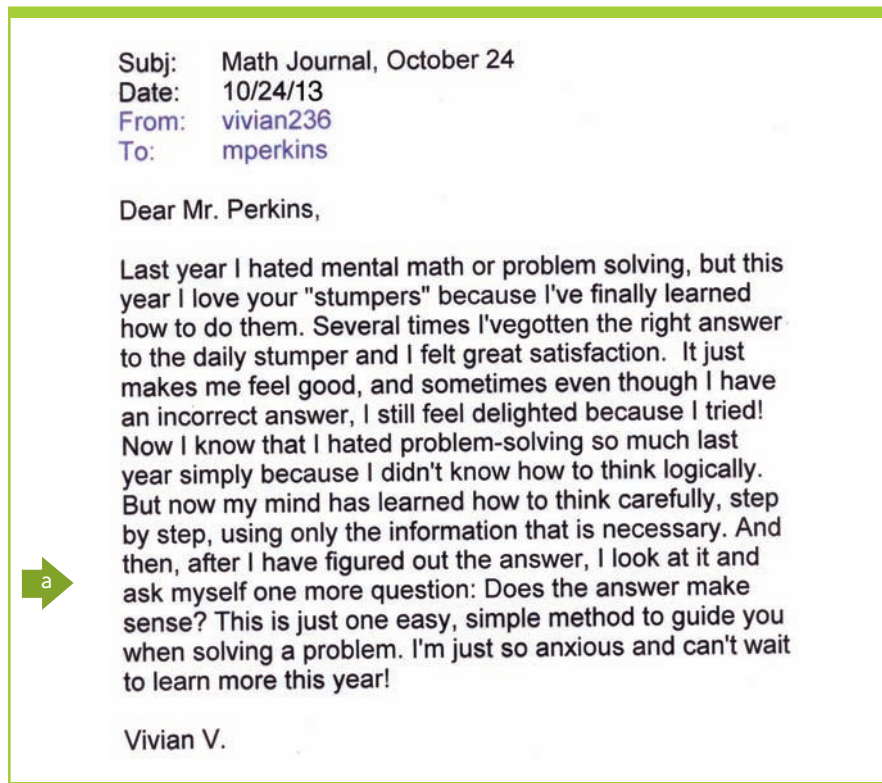
No, thank *you*, Athee and Loren.

FEEDBACK LOOPS

Purpose: Everyone in the classroom has reasons to give responses and feedback to others; written conversations make that process quiet, thoughtful, and private.

Student-Teacher Assessments

We teachers are accustomed to giving students feedback about their work, but we often forget (for some mysterious reason!) to ask them for their feedback on *us*. If we do want to hear from kids through a safe, private channel, a dialogue journal is the just-right vehicle. And most of the time, kids' responses will make us feel good.

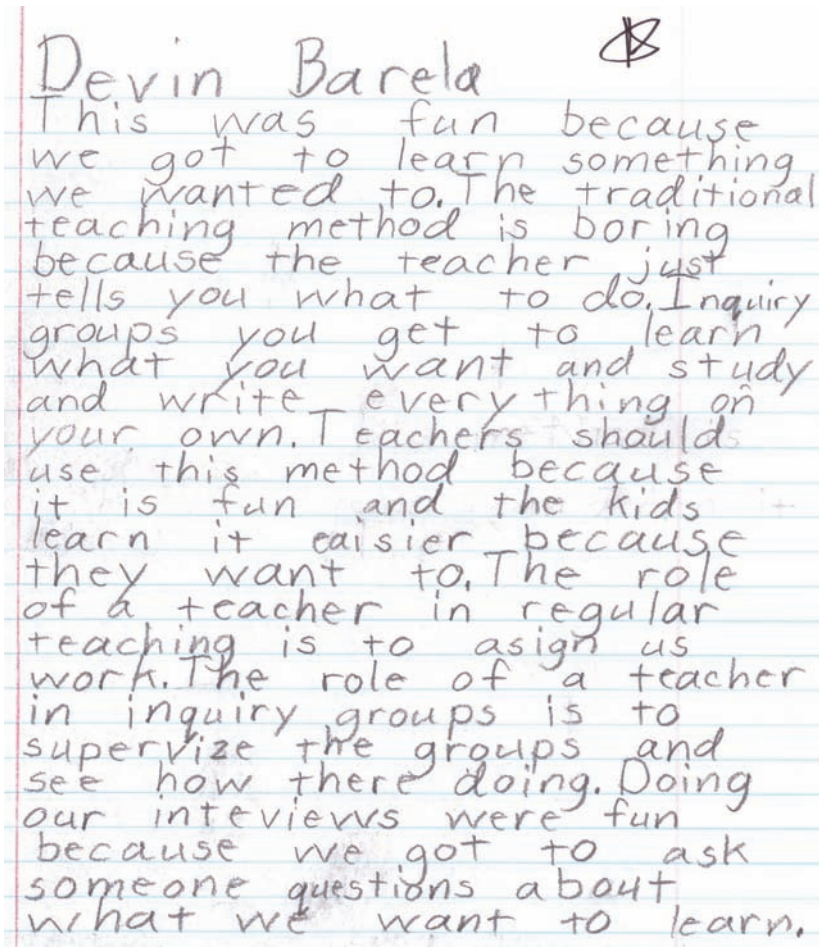


This ingratiating note also shows Vivian's understanding of an important mathematical principle—checking for reasonableness.

Figure 4.19

Wouldn't you love to have Vivian in *your* class this year?

After teaching an extended inquiry circles unit, Smokey asked his Santa Fe sixth graders to share their reactions to the process, and here's what Devin had to say.



Devin Barela ✎

This was fun because we got to learn something we wanted to. The traditional teaching method is boring because the teacher just tells you what to do. Inquiry groups you get to learn what you want and study and write everything on your own. Teachers should use this method because it is fun and the kids learn it easier because they want to. The role of a teacher in regular teaching is to assign us work. The role of a teacher in inquiry groups is to supervise the groups and see how there doing. Doing our interviewrs were fun because we got to ask someone questions about what we want to learn.



In this particular inquiry circle project, each group was required to do a phone interview with at least one expert in the field of their research topic.

Figure 4.20

Whew, that's a nice validation of this particular unit, but a pretty sweeping critique of school business as usual, from the kids'-eye view.

We teachers are pretty accustomed to giving feedback, assessment, advice, and sometimes downright criticism. We can dish it out—but can we take it? Dialogue journals offer us a chance to find out. An old friend of ours in Minnesota taught six-week keyboarding classes for many years. For one exercise, she'd have kids write her a formal letter. She always said that “the content doesn't matter as long as you have several paragraphs.” Mistake.

Mrs. Charlotte Elm

West Bluff High School

1204 Maple Street

Excelsior, Minnesota, 55397

Dear Mrs. Elm,

So far this semester, the material we have covered has been a bore. We do the same thing every day. I am disappointed with the content of this class. At times I have looked at the clock on your wall, which seems to run backwards, and contemplated suicide.

Despite my utter boredom during this class, I have learned many new keyboarding skills. My rate has gone up considerably since the beginning of the course and my reaches have become easier.

Sincerely yours,

Gil Perez

Gilbert Perez

On a more serious note, a teacher we won't name received the note in Figure 4.21 from a student with special needs.

Thankfully, these kinds of kid notes—and teacher assessment strategies—are very rare.

Dear miss
 In writer's workshop
 when I writ a story
 and you chang the
 spelling and take out
 words it kinda makes
 me feel like you
 want my story to be
 your story and
 what really make
 me mad is
 "my spelling" wude
 you tell me
 if that's what you

Dear Miss . . . , In writer's workshop when I write a story and you change the spelling and take out words it kinda makes me feel like you want my story to be your story and what really makes me mad is "my spelling" ☹ Would you tell me if that's what you think you're doing? Would you like it if someone wanted your story? But you might like it and want to have it but that's not what I think. PS: Would you try and be patient with my spelling.

think your doing?
 wold you like
 it if somone
 woned your stor?
 But you m+ like it
 and want to have it
 Bu- that not wat I
 think.
 P.S. wold you
 try and
 be patient
 whit my
 spelling



Turns out this teacher owned a hierarchy of face ink stamps that ran the gamut of assessment from—who knows?—ecstasy to revulsion. And she would slam a big frowny face on every spelling error her fourth graders made, IEP or not.

Figure 4.21

Listening to kids' advice can really pay off—both for the good ideas we get from them, and from the trust that's built when we solicit their feedback and then take it seriously. High school teacher Nancy Steineke asks her kids to offer suggestions for improving their sophomore English class. You can see their ideas reflected in the responses Nancy wrote.

Dear Katie,

I think you are right about getting up more—putting some more physical activity into class. Have you ever seen any good activities that other teachers have used? If so, tell me about them. In any event, if we're just still sitting around two weeks from now, remind me that we need to move!

Mrs. Steineke

Dear Matt,

Thanks for the input on the assignments; I'll keep that "more visual" idea in mind. Since you are enjoying *Band of Brothers*, you might enjoy some other nonfiction books about World War 2. I know of a few, so if you need some suggestions, just ask. BTW, have you read any books by Chris Crutcher? There are a couple of them that focus on a high school swim team. All of his books have something to do with sports.

Mrs. Steineke

Dear Steve,

Almost everyone has mentioned the book buddy project, so I'm definitely going to bring that back soon. I'm glad you've found the text marking useful. This is a strategy you can use in any class any time you have to read something and really think about it. *After* is one of my favorite YA novels as well, but I thought the ending was dumb. Aliens? Come on. It would be better if the new "evil" principal's control motivations were something believable.

Mrs. Steineke

Nancy's undefensive and appreciative responses make a huge statement about what kind of relationship she is seeking with students.

Behavior Support Letters

With all our years in the classroom, we've both had our share of "behavior problems"—and sometimes our students also act up (insert rim-shot here). Of course, when there are immediate, life-threatening misbehaviors, you have to act swiftly to restore order and guarantee the survival of Western civilization. But, when you think about it, how common are those "must act now" scenarios?

For us anyway, the common, garden-variety, drip-drip-drip, death-of-a-thousand-cuts discipline issues are mostly recurrent and low-level. It's kids who do, or don't do, the same damn bothersome thing, day in and day out. But if you call these students out in class, you're putting them on the defensive. Excuses, bad feelings, and ongoing noncompliance are the typical outcomes. And for kids with interfering behaviors, any public rebuke provides an often irresistible opening for a psycho-throwdown, with you playing the other Mexican wrestler.

How about a nice, private, patient, and reasonable letter instead?

Dear Brad,

Today was the third day in a row that you came to your inquiry group without your research materials and your journal. You know that this bogs down the group and makes progress hard for everyone. People are counting on you to do your share of the work, on time.

So please decide what steps you are going to take to solve this problem and write me back by tomorrow at 8 with your solution. Let me know how I can help you implement your plan.

Thanks, Mr. Daniels

To Daniel and Devin,

We've talked about how distracting it can be for other kids when some people walk around and poke their head into other people's meetings. Take a look at your own group's ground rules: One says "no going to other groups." Write back and tell me how you'll fix this tomorrow.

Ms. Daniels

Dear Brynne,

I couldn't help noticing this morning that you seemed sad or distracted. Is there something I can do to help you refocus? Can you come back and dive in with us, as usual? Let me know how to help.

Mr. Daniels

Luke,

Tomorrow, will you please try to put all your things away at cleanup time? Post your answer on the message board when you come in, and I will check in with you to see how it goes.

Thanks,

Mr. D

Raphael,

I notice you have a hard time putting your phone away when we start class. Please find a nice deep pocket and zip it in there!

Mrs. D

One of the advantages of these behavior support notes is you can hand one to a kid at the end of class (or email it after school, even better). Then they can read it in private and be mad at you, and then read it later and be less mad. And then come to terms with the fact that you're asking for a response or a behavior change. We have found that these quick letters are amazingly effective—and are great souvenirs to share with parents as needed.

You might wonder, don't kids get freaked when they're handed a letter at the end of class? And don't the other kids hoot and catcall when they see somebody receiving a teacher note after class? "Ooooooh, Brandon's gonna get it!" Actually, if you have a classroom where constant letter-writing is standard behavior, nobody knows what the content of any note might be. As we tell our students at the beginning of a class: "We're all going to write each other a lot of letters in here this year."

The preceding examples are mostly the onetime, fine-tuning variety. We can also engage students in ongoing behavior support dialogues. At a high school in Chicago, one student was consistently disrupting Mack Dillon's algebra class. So Mack and teacher-consultant Yolanda Simmons cooked up a plan to enlist Karen as a classroom helper, instead of rebuking her as a behavior problem. Yolanda initiated a series of letters in which she asked Karen to help her figure out how to improve the math class. Together, they laid a plan, and a couple of weeks later, Karen celebrated her success in "saving" Mr. Dillon.

Dear Ms. Simmons,

In my opinion, 7th period Algebra has really improved since I wrote Mr. Dillon a few suggestions that I felt would help to improve 7th pd. Algebra.

Mr. Dillon used my advice wisely. He took them and expanded them in many different ways. For example, I suggested that he let people who understood what they were doing, help others who didn't. Mr. Dillon gave the class a quick quiz just to see where we were in the lesson, and to identify those who had the lesson down pat. Mr. Dillon and I place them in groups where they could help others around them. That has been successful.

In class Mr. Dillon doesn't have to do a lot of yelling because the seats are arranged so that the students can do their work without talking to their friends. I even heard a few of my friends in 7th period say that Algebra is going better than before.

In conclusion, I think that Mr. Dillon's 7th pd. Algebra class has really improved thanks to you Ms. Simmons, Mr. Dillon, and myself. So far, all of my suggestions have preserved Mr. Dillon from failure.

Karen

Karen, the scourge of seventh period, became a solid citizen through Yolanda's surreptitious behavior support letters. Now that's *discipline*.

Student Self-Assessments

We've already seen the many ways that Michele Timble uses letter-writing with her fourth graders. Sometimes she asks kids to reflect on their work by writing a note to their future selves. Just the salutations hint at the delight kids take in this time-travel experiment:

Dear myself,
Dear Future Self,
Dear Beautiful,
Dear Noelia in the future,
Dear wonderful awesome self,
Dear Future Me,

Figure 4.22 is Jolie's self-assessment of her work in a small-group research project.

We're betting that Jolie does become a great leader if she can hang onto this self-insight, which most bosses seem to lose along the way!

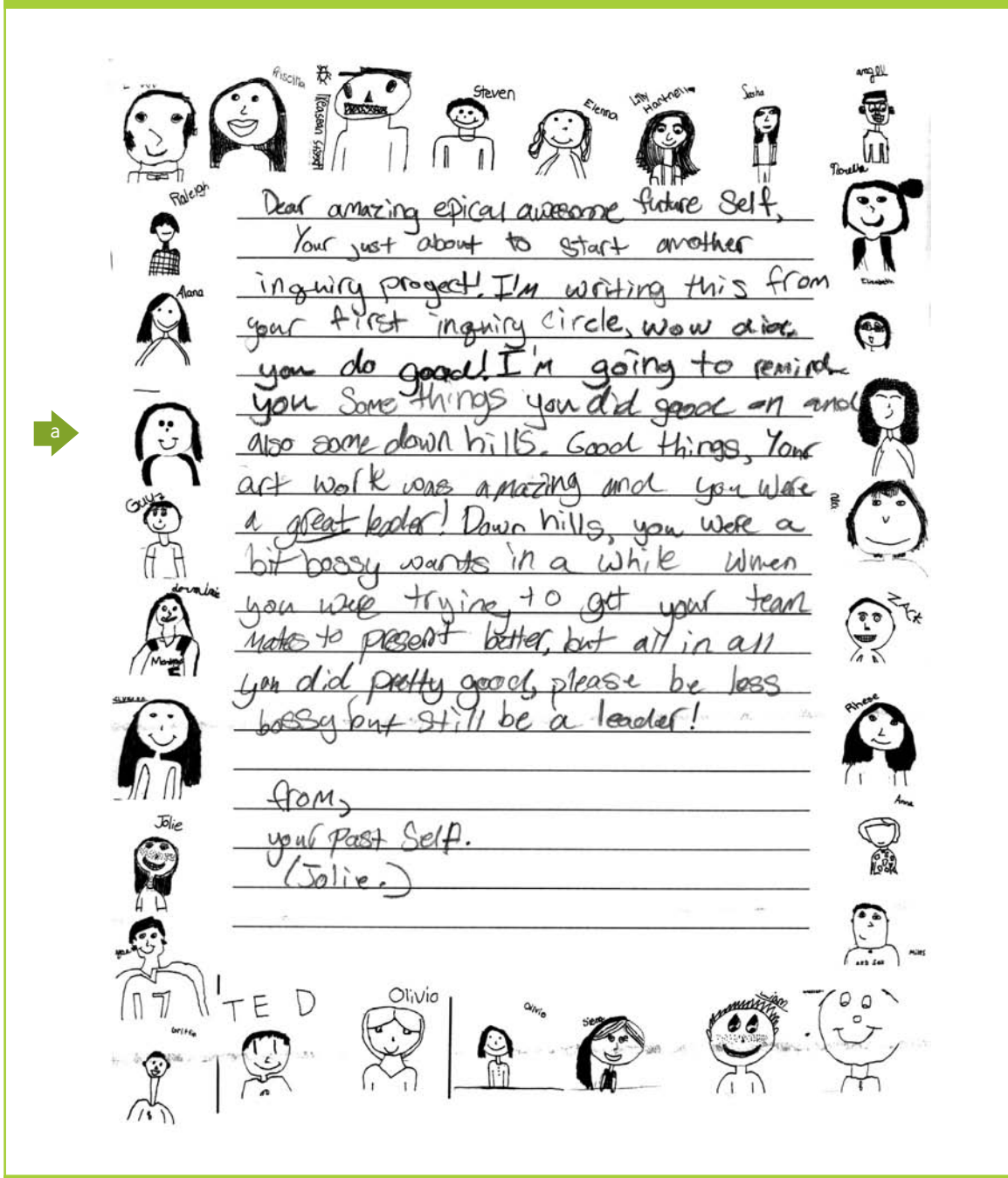
Kid-Kid Assessments

Just as we want kids to become increasingly responsible for assessing themselves, setting goals, and monitoring their work, we also want them to offer useful feedback to their classmates. But we step carefully here, not wanting any impulsive or hurtful words to get loose in the classroom.

With Michele modeling constructive feedback every day, and the kids having frequent chances to skillfully address an audience in writing, they're ready to give each other some mini assessment notes.

After students presented their findings on some mini research projects, Michele invited kids to send each other brief notes of feedback and suggestions (see Figures 4.23, 4.24, and 4.25).

These comments have a pretty good level of specificity—what worked well and the occasional suggestion. And everyone is now well equipped to talk about President Taft at any future cocktail party.



Jolie reflects upon her own uphill and “downhill” as an inquiry group member.

Figure 4.22

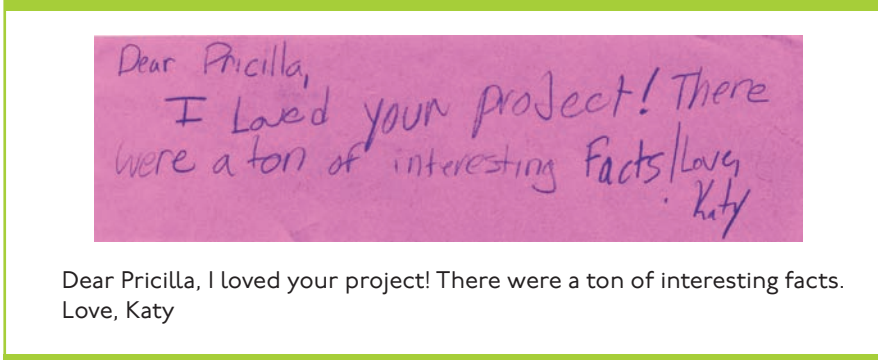


Figure 4.23

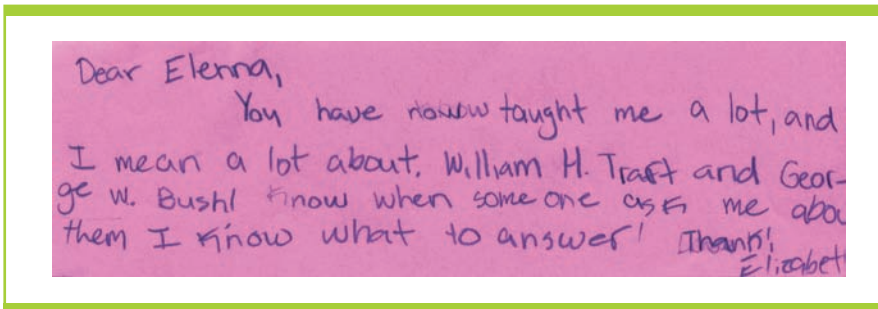


Figure 4.24

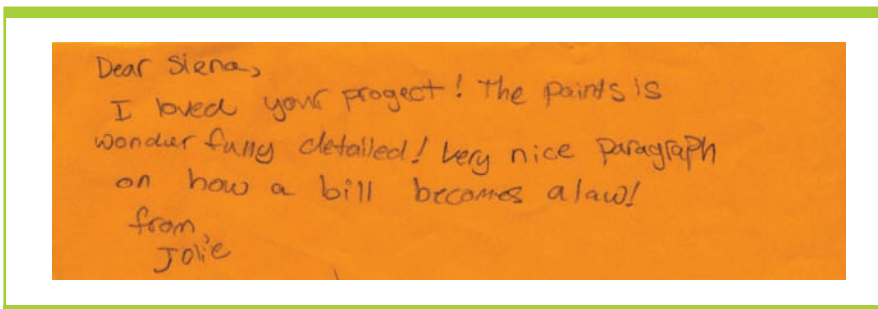


Figure 4.25

“Classroom audiences are notoriously twitchy and distractible, but if kids know they will be writing a note to each presenter immediately afterwards, it focuses their attention.”

But there are other benefits beyond presenter feedback here, too. When you sit down to listen to a classmate’s presentation, having this task in mind has a very salutary effect. Classroom audiences are notoriously twitchy and distractible, but if kids know they will be writing a note to each presenter immediately afterwards, it focuses their attention.

TEACHER RESPONSE TO STUDENT WRITING

Purpose: When students submit written work to teachers, a powerful way of responding is to write them a letter commenting on the writing.

Given all our warnings about not overdoing the writing of letters to students, this next variation may come as a surprise. We believe that, on occasion, when you have the peace of mind and time, it's great to put down the red pen and respond to kids' writing with—writing. We are so professionally enculturated to point out what's *wrong* with students' writing, but working writers urgently need human validation and feedback on what's working well.

Elaine: Teaching writing in high school or college, I have always written letters. For me, it's the best way to give a whole and thoughtful response to student writing. I have done the occasional rubric, but both the students and I find the letters more satisfying. I write to them on real stationery, and start with “Dear So-and-So.” This is a big effort making a handmade “gift” for every student, but it speaks volumes about both craft and caring. My hand gets tired too, so sometimes I will type and print the letters on schoolish stationery templates I've found for free online.

I respond personally to the writing piece, giving examples from my life that relate to what they've written. I talk about the significance of what they've said and suggest how to strengthen their message. I also respond to the style, the voice, and the language, noting all the positives I see. I may also give suggestions or note one or two areas, say quotation marks or apostrophes, where the student needs more work. All in all, the students are able to receive the feedback better in this way, couched in a personal context. It feels profoundly specific. And I love not being constrained by numbers or points.

So, in this way, letters can be for assessment as well as classroom climate development. And as students revise their papers, they write me back, sometimes on stationery, sometimes via email. I treasure those responses. We come to know each other this way.

Abigail,

I just finished rereading your story, and it really does take my breath away. You are a beautiful writer.

Melvin is alive in this book. His boredom and depression are drawn so realistically. By way of connection, I think my son grew up in his room, watching TV with the blinds down. It was a good thing his room was next to the kitchen or I never would have seen him at all, I think. Your colorized photos enhance the story beautifully. I had to pause to really think about them. I think my favorite is the crumpled envelope with the address. Reminds me of letters I've kept, both dear and damaging.

The mom's careworn and stressed situation is presented thoughtfully. The miscommunication between her and Melvin is painful. Words said, heard or not heard, listened to or not. How quickly parents can fall into harping, and how equally quickly kids can fall into brood mode.

The absent dad is a full character, too. Melvin persists that his dad is cool, and maybe he was. But why is it up to the mom to tell Melvin the truth? That's pretty dreadful, not behavior of a good dad. Jerk. And a new baby, a knife in the heart. I'm wondering what in your life caused you to pick this path for the story? I sense you have a good family situation, but I think you must have experienced some grave disappointments to be able to write this so sensitively.

But I haven't even talked about the actual writing yet, and that's what blows me away. Several sentences or images that affect me are:



1. "I hate kidney beans, that weird skin they have."
2. "That's twice this month she's fed the floor before me."
3. "She actually brought me home . . . pink blanket . . ."
4. "I have some important zombie killing to attend to."
5. "the thick tires on the rough pavement"
6. "She makes weird transitions like that all the time."



Pointing out specific words or phrases that worked is more powerful than almost any generalization a teacher can make about a piece of writing.

7. “Final Falls . . . it sounded a lot like my favorite video game . . .”
8. “The picture is so clear you could eat the turkey they advertise at Thanksgiving . . .”
9. “the locked drawer”
10. “Truth. What does that even mean? If you say it enough . . .” Such a great reminder from the earlier: “Tacos. What does that word even mean . . .?”

I can feel what it’s like to be in that house, smell the living room, the ground meat cooking, the fresh laundry. You’ve done such a remarkable job of creating an environment in so few pages. I know you must have worked so very hard and can’t say enough about how much I enjoyed your story. Keep it in a safe place.

*Sincerely,
Elaine Daniels*

MULTI-AGE DIALOGUE JOURNALS

Purpose: Older kids can be strong writing mentors for younger ones, as well as offering them a big buddy around the school.

When Smokey was teaching sixth grade a few years back, he partnered up with first-grade teacher Jessica Gonzalez to establish yearlong writing buddies. Figure 4.26 is one example of an exchange between sixth grader Karen and Neivy, a first-grade English language learner.

To understand how this conversation was created in April, you have to envision Neivy, in September, a first grader recently arrived from Mexico, sitting in the lap of her very own great big sixth grader, Karen. Carefully teacher-selected pairs of first and sixth graders are scattered around the rug in Jessica’s first-grade

room at Salazar Elementary School in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Everyone has a brand-new writing buddy; one pair is a match made in heaven—Big Jose and Little Jose.

Because it's early in the year, the little ones cannot write much yet. So the partners are passing one pad back and forth, writing or drawing as best they can, and reading the letters out loud to each other. Some first graders are simply dictating to their sixth graders a letter they would write *if they could*. Later

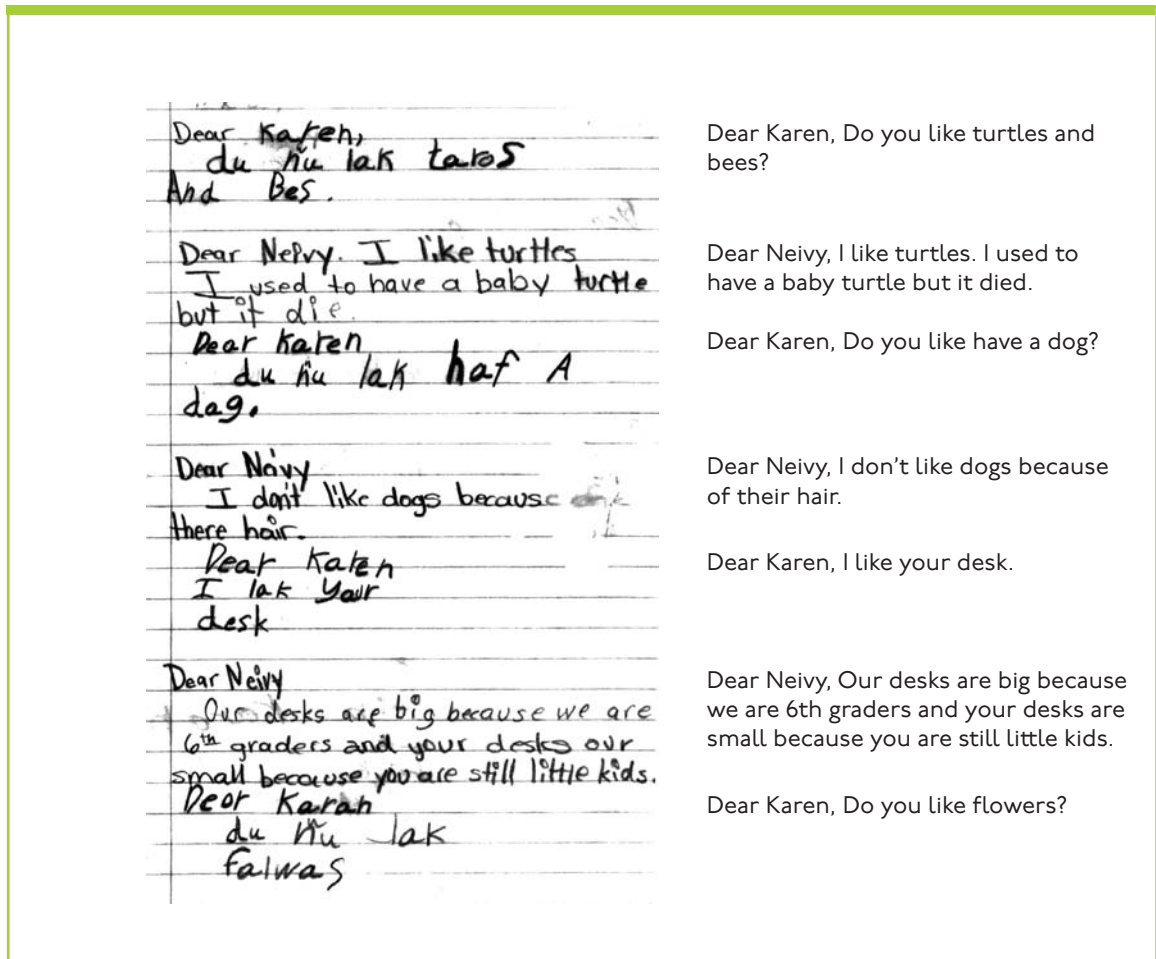
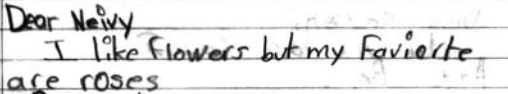
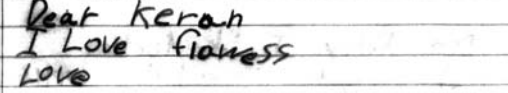
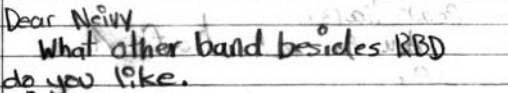
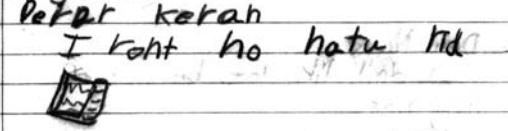
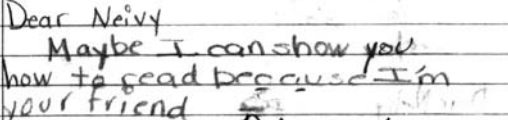
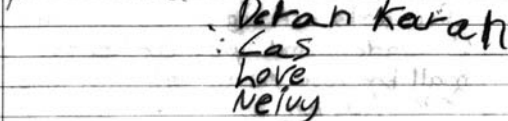


Figure 4.26 (continued)

Figure 4.26 (continued)

	<p>Dear Neivy, I like flowers but my favorite are roses.</p>
	<p>Dear Karen, I love flowers, love.</p>
	<p>Dear Neivy, What other band besides RBD do you like?</p>
	<p>Dear Karen, I don't know how to read.</p>
	<p>Dear Neivy, Maybe I can teach you how to read because I'm your friend.</p>
	<p>Dear Karen, Yes, love Neivy</p>



Karen feels the conversation fading and tries to amp it up with a new topic, and her partner responds with a surprising revelation.

Figure 4.26

in the year, they'll be able to compose their own letters and "mail" them to the other end of the building without trooping through the halls to sit side by side.

Karen went on to be a wonderful teacher for Neivy, as they exchanged letters throughout the year, stretching Neivy's sense of herself as a writer. (And Ms. Gonzalez was a pretty good teacher, too.) All through the year, whenever they saw their sixth-grade buddies in the halls or at an assembly—or, oh my God, at the grocery store!—the first graders felt 6 feet tall.

As the year came toward a close at Salazar, a K–6 school, the sixth-grade writing buddies would be heading off to middle school. No! A big graduation ceremony was planned, and the first graders asked to be part of it. At the June graduation ceremony, with a full house of families dressed in their finest, the first-grade writing buddies took the stage last. With great ceremony, the now 7-year-olds each presented their beloved sixth-grade pals with one last special letter, placed in a painstakingly decorated envelope. Inside each one is advice on how to succeed in middle school.



Figure 4.27

In this chapter, we have seen dialogue journals in which kids criticize the teacher's handwriting, reflect on their own social skills, work through math problems, give advice to older students, and much more. This range of use shows the power of paired written conversations. When we sit down to write with just one partner, we enter a relationship with complete accountability, one to another. Not only do we “cover” curricular topics, we also build trusting relationships between teachers and students, between kids and kids, and between big kids and little kids.

MANAGEMENT TIPS FOR DIALOGUE JOURNALS

Training Students. As with any new classroom activity, it is vital that the teacher demonstrate it first. You can pass out samples of yourself corresponding with another teacher or a volunteer student. Better yet, do it live in the classroom by projecting both partners at work writing or composing on side-by-side easel charts, exchanging places to “receive” and answer each letter.

Forming Partners. If it helps, feel free to match kids up for optimum results—especially when they are first trying this structure. In pairing kids, consider text production; some kids were born with a golden shovel in their hands, and can churn out text without hesitation. Others just write more slowly, maybe because they are actually trying to think before they write. Since it can be discouraging to be partnered with someone who writes way more and way faster, we may pair kids by writing speed. This is temporary grouping, not labeling. Over time, kids should be writing with lots of different partners.

Using Effective Prompts. On pages 66–69, we have listed a variety of general and specific prompts for written conversations. Some are quite open-ended, simply calling for students to share reactions, responses, interpretations, opinions, wonderings, or summaries of the text, topic, or experience that’s under study. Other prompts can be highly focused, yet still invite original responses when they focus on *why* or *how*, not so much on *who/what/where/when*. Factual recall questions do not spark conversations. We must give kids something rich, complex, and multidimensional to write about. There’s always a temptation to infuse a quiz or a reading check into our prompts, but doing so usually kills off the conversational impulse.

Dealing With Uneven Numbers. The great thing about pair work is there can only be *one* straggler in any classroom (unless you let kids immediately form groups of three, which you never would). If there is a “leftover” student, either you be his or her partner or else allow *a single* group of three to work together.

Timing the Writing. For the “live” notes, which pairs write in class, we want to keep the pace up, so allow *one to three minutes* of writing, or something like *a quarter to half a page* between passes. For the “takeaway” dialogue journals, which are composed more thoughtfully and sent like mail, kids might write for *five or more minutes*, filling a *full page*, sometimes more.

Sore Hands. American students (and their teachers) do far less handwriting these days, so we are all out of shape for extended old-school writing. We can bemoan the death of cursive, but this is a reality. Two solutions: First, build kids’ stamina by starting short and ramping up. Writing by hand is

a life skill that's far from obsolete. Second option, do the writing on a keyboard—if everyone is on the same type of device. See the following tip.

Using Technology. We say much more about this in Chapter 6, but of course you can have kids write dialogue journals on computers, laptops, tablets, or even phones—as long as everyone is using the same tool and can use it as fluently as a pen or pencil. Many teachers use a web space (Edmodo, Google Docs) where they can arrange kids into partnerships or “rooms” for one-to-one dialoguing. But remember that traditional paper-and-pencil, sitting-beside-each-other written conversation has some special benefits. For one, you can look right up in an instant and switch to talking out loud.

The Teacher's Role During Dialogue Journals. When kids are working on dialogue journals, your job is to keep moving and keep time. You are looking over the pairs' shoulders, watching the writing go down on the page, perhaps stopping to whisper some help or encouragement—and calling the letter swaps at intervals that make sense. Enjoy how hard the kids are working!

Moving Toward Kids' Choosing Partners. Especially early in the year, it is healthy to have kids *randomly* assigned to partners, with those pairings changing very frequently, so that everyone gets to work with everyone else. Then, once we have built strong and diffuse friendship patterns throughout the group (by Thanksgiving? by second semester?), we can let kids pick their own partners.

English Language Learners and Students With Special Needs. If we have English language learners, it can help for them to work with a student from the same language group. And we always encourage *drawing* as a way to participate in a written conversation. But even when working in English, the rehearsal time kids get in written conversations (versus having to spontaneously speak in front of a whole class) is an accommodation in itself.