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The Reading and Writing Connection: Merging Two Reciprocal Content Areas

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Keywords
literacy, reading, writing, blogs, pen pals

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Merging Two Reciprocal Content Areas

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is make connections between two content areas, reading and writing, which have traditionally been separated and consider the relationship between their theoretical underpinnings. Based on their reciprocal nature, the authors posit that students could greatly benefit by reading and writing being taught simultaneously. Relying on this premise, this article provides the reader with three practical strategies that could be applied in the literacy classroom to intertwine reading and writing. These practical strategies include: classroom blogs, graphic depictions, and pen pal responses to literature.

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The Reading and Writing Connection:

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My classroom was a typical classroom with bright colors, student work appropriately hung from the ceiling, and graphs and charts on the walls. Most prominent, though, was the large "Daily Schedule" listed along the white board. A portion of the whiteboard was segmented into six smaller sections entitled: Reading, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Writing, and Specialty Class. Everyday my students would walk in, look at the whiteboard, and know exactly what the day would entail. We had a certain amount of time designated for each subject and when the allotted time passed, we moved on to the next subject. As an "organized" classroom teacher, I prided myself on adhering to my schedule. I believed whole-heartedly that my students needed a secure and stable environment in my classroom. One of the ways I provided them with such a place was by developing a routine. What I didn't anticipate, however, was that my good intentions might result in fissures between subjects- a continental divide between each content area in which my students saw no bridge. We had compartmentalized our learning into six separate boxes—and when we were done with one subject, we closed the box and opened up a different box. When the clock hand hit 9:30 we put our "reading brains" away along with our reading books and took out our "writing brains" and writing books.

One day as I gazed at my structured Daily Schedule, I wondered why I had separated "writing brains" from "reading brains." The separation of reading and writing became glaringly apparent one day as I worked with a small group of struggling readers. During independent reading time, I asked my students to respond to a text they were reading in written form. I was met with an onslaught of protestations, "It's not writing time!" and "Why are we doing this?" My students were frustrated at just the notion, and I realized the belief that one subject should

not cross into the space of another was a problem of my own creation. Even subjects which might appear to be obviously related (reading and writing) were not seen as having a valuable connection by my students. I realized that change was necessary in my classroom. When in life will students be asked to compartmentalize their knowledge about specific subjects into separate boxes? I was determined to find a better way to teach children reading and writing hand-in-hand. I paired with a like-minded colleague to begin exploring new strategies to connect the two subjects. My hope, in particular, was that this connection would positively affect my struggling readers.

Brief Review of Literature

The main purpose of this article is to discuss the importance and practicality of educating children with both reading and writing as intimate and reciprocal subjects. With this in mind, we discuss how reading and writing might be implemented to influence struggling readers. As two previous teachers of struggling readers, we provide practical ideas that may bridge a gap between reading and writing. In our experience, struggling readers have often been given a scripted intervention program to help increase their reading abilities. Yet, some have cautioned against this notion of a "magic bullet" (Alvermann, 2003, p. 2) to fix reading problems. It is our intent to show that reading and writing need to be taught concurrently to struggling readers. First we introduce brief literature on the reading and writing connection, then a brief background on struggling readers.

Reading and Writing Connection

Historically, reading and writing have been instructionally separated (Nelson & Calfee, 1998). Some have investigated why we have continued to teach reading and writing separately. Kaestle (1985) asserted that it could be because different educators view the topics at varying

levels of importance. For example, if a teacher did not consider writing as vital for students to learn but valued reading, he or she may spend more instructional time teaching reading and separate writing from this instruction. Clifford (1989) posited that reading and writing may be instructionally separated because different groups within the profession may take ownership of one or the other. In other words, the subjects may be separate because different organizations have taken interest in the particular subject. For example, an English teacher may have greater interest in writing because of their professional and educational background. Similarly, Shanahan (1998) has furthered this discussion by asserting that it is possible that reading and writing are quite different because of their separate theoretical underpinnings.

Though reading and writing have generally been taught as two separate subjects in the past, recent literature has shown a change in direction. In 2000, Berninger appealed that speaking, listening, reading, and writing all develop parallel to one another. The author discounted that these skills develop through discrete stages and argued that the skills continue to overlap throughout the learning process. Similarly, in 2006, Shanahan attested that writing is affected by reading and therefore, should be taught in unison. There is literature that advocates for reading and writing to be taught together. Amongst this research there are three general categories which address the reading/writing connection: (a), the shared knowledge approach (b) the procedural connections approach, and (c) the rhetorical relations approach (Fitzgerald & Shananahan, 2000).

Shared knowledge approach. Some research has demonstrated that reading and writing are intimately intertwined because of similar theoretical foundations and cognitive processes. For example, in order to be a skilled reader *and* writer you will need phonemic knowledge, orthographic knowledge, semantic knowledge, and syntactic knowledge—all elements that are

prevalent in both reading and writing. A case can be made that because of conceptual similarities reading and writing should be taught in conjunction with one another—as one informs and supports the other (Tierney & Pearson, 1983; Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000).

Procedural connections approach. Some have viewed reading and writing as being connected because both are needed to accomplish an external goal. An external goal could be a school assignment or a real-life goal. For example, in order to increase comprehension (a reading skill) note-taking (a writing skill) may prove to be beneficial. Additionally, an individual may need to comprehend a job description in order to write an appropriate job resume (Slotte & Linka, 1999).

Rhetorical relations approach. Quite similar to the procedural connections approach, the rhetorical relations approach focuses on the end goal of communication. It is based on the notion that reading and writing both have communication as a foundation. In other words, we use a piece of writing to communicate a concept to an individual, and an individual understands the message by reading the text. From a communication stance, reading can be thought of as the receiving of information while writing can be thought of as the act of sending information. Reading and writing are so intertwined with communication that in order for students to master communication activities, students must engage in both reading and writing (Nelson & Calfee, 1998). A majority of the practical implications discussed later in the paper are supported by this notion of reading and writing as communication.

Seven Instructional Principles

In 1988, Shanahan introduced seven instructional principles when considering how to implement reading and writing into the classroom. These seven principles have guided our practical instructional strategies discussed later in this article. Shanahan's (1988) first principle

is to teach *both* reading and writing. The author then posited that reading and writing should be taught from the earliest grades and continued throughout later grades. Although some may view that an individual must be proficient in reading before learning to write, Shanahan argued that this is not the case. Reading and writing can be of greater support when taught in congruence and is more effective if started at an earlier age. Shanahan then asserted, with his third principle, that reading and writing should reflect the developmental nature of the student. In other words, do not give students a task for which they are not developmentally ready. Shanahan also recommended that teachers make the reading and writing connection explicit arguing that students may not always transfer knowledge from one to the other. For example, if a teacher taught a child how to spell a word—that does not necessarily mean that the student would recognize the word in print. Shanahan's fifth principle is to emphasize the content and process relations between reading and writing. The sixth principle is to emphasize communications which as mentioned earlier, Nelson and Calfee (1998) view as the foundation of reading and writing. Shanahan (1988) asserted that these principals should be emphasized to students. The last principle is to teach reading and writing in meaningful contexts. Reading and writing activities should be as authentic as possible. When students feel a purpose for reading and writing and know it is meaningful for their life, they may be more apt to engage. We used Shanahan's (1988) seven instructional principles to create practical strategies in hopes of particularly helping struggling readers. In the next section of this article we provide a brief background on struggling readers.

Struggling Readers

How to help struggling readers has been an important topic for quite some time. In recent years many researchers and educators have begun to investigate why so many students struggle with reading. The sophisticated thought processes needed in order to comprehend every word,

sentence, paragraph, chapter and book are complex, to say the least. So with what do struggling readers have the most difficulty? Tovani (2000) posited that texts becomes inaccessible to students when they lack four things, (a) the comprehension strategies needed to construct meaning, (b) the necessary background knowledge, (c) the ability to recognize organizational patterns, and (d) the reason or purpose for reading the particular text.

It is true that there are many struggling readers throughout our public school system that grapple with the very issues Tovani (2000) represented. Yet, some would argue that with proper teaching methods, students might ameliorate these barriers to learning (Scanlon, 2010; Allington, 2012). The question is, then, how does one instruct a struggling reader? Of course many scholars have investigated this very question and many have created their own set of answers. We agree with Allington (2012) who strongly argued that classroom instruction must be high-quality. Allington (2012) asserted, "The most powerful feature of schools, in terms of developing children as readers and writers, is the quality of classroom instruction" (p. 159).

In order to achieve high-quality instruction, we believe the literacy classroom must include: student choice, authentic experiences, and thoughtful literacy. Students should read something of their choosing every single day. Students are more likely to enjoy reading and continue reading when they have interest in the texts they read (Allington & Gabriel, 2012). A recent study found that when students are given access to self-selected texts, their reading achievement improves (Krashen, 2011). Students need authentic literacy experiences that are directly related to their everyday lives. It would be odd to find a child completing a workbook page in the "real world." In fact, successful literacy teachers have been identified as avoiding such activities (Allington, 2002). Literacy activities in the classroom should mirror authentic tasks needed in life (Reutzel & Cooter, 2000). Students must engage in *thoughtful literacy* which

is characterized by making connections, summarizing, analyzing, and evaluating (Allington, 2012).

One avenue to improve thoughtful literacy is to engage in meaningful discussion with peers. Adults engage in meaningful discussions around texts quite frequently. If a group of adults reads a book for a book club, rarely do they quiz each other on the main characters the plot. Rather, adults more often discuss more meaningful topics—connecting to the text, or his or her analysis or evaluation of the text (Allington, 2012). Why, then, would we avoid preparing students to thoughtfully discuss texts? It has been posited that struggling readers engage in thoughtful literacy the least of classroom students (Nystrand, 2006). All readers need thoughtful literacy experience (Allington, 2012).

We believe that through high quality reading *and* writing instruction as identified by Shanahan's (1988) seven instructional principles, in conjunction with student choice, authentic experiences and thoughtful literacy we may help struggling readers to develop the skills identified by Tovani (2000) including: (a) the comprehension strategies needed to construct meaning, (b) the necessary background knowledge, (c) the ability to recognize organizational patterns, and (d) the reason or purpose for reading the particular text.

Three Reading/Writing Strategies

Throughout the next few pages, we introduce reading and writing strategies that may be implemented to help struggling readers. We believe that by incorporating student choice and the combination of reading and writing activities, struggling readers may find success. We introduce three reading and writing ideas including: (a) classroom blogs, (b) graphic depictions, and (c) pen-pals. As we introduce each idea, we cover four basic descriptions; the instructional practice, how it is implemented, what the benefits are, and what the challenges may be.

Classroom Blogs

It seems as though students are constantly checking facebook, blogs, twitter and emails throughout the day. They are making their lives more public—what they did on the weekend, what they ate for breakfast, and what kind of mood they are in. Many students are already quite familiar with technological advances and using their interest in social media may be an avenue to make the connection between reading and writing. Similarly, when a student feels as if someone might read their writing, they are more apt to put more time and effort into the content of the message. Blogs give children the power and feeling of accomplishment of seeing their published work.

What is it? A "blog" is an informal term for "web log"—which can be thought of as an online journal or a web-based log. Students have the ability to keep a journal of their thoughts all on one webpage by creating separate posts. This blog can be made public so that anyone who types in the web address can see it, it can be made private so no one can read it, and it can also be changed to allow access to certain people. For this particular strategy, it would be beneficial for students to keep written blogs and allow access to only the students in the participating classroom. Blogger.com is a free online website where individuals can set up their own blog.

How is it implemented? Blogs can be used in a myriad of ways, though for the purposes of this article, we are focus on how these literacy ideas can be used to bridge the gap between reading and writing. Blogs can be used as an avenue to encourage writing. More specifically, blogs can be a fantastic tool to further writings on literature. This may look quite different for every student and even every classroom. Blogs can be used formally and informally; as simply taking the form of a reading journal wherein students record their thoughts about their readings that day or on the other side of the spectrum, blogs can be used to publish writing that students

have been working on for quite some time. For example, if a student loves to read poetry, a blog could be used to make the reading-writing connection by publishing his or her own poems. In our particular experience, we have used blogs as an avenue to publish work for classmates, friends, families, and even individuals and other schools across the nation and world to view. We used blogs as a way for students to publish a piece of writing about particular literature that they were reading. Below we have provided general steps that we used in our classroom.

Steps might include:

1. Before the school year begins, become familiar with using a blog. Set up an account for yourself and peruse the website. We recommend that throughout the summer, you write blogs posts about books that you have read. This will give you an opportunity to practice setting up a blog and practice writing, editing, and viewing posts.

2. Toward the very beginning of the school year, set up an account for each student on blogger.com. Students will need an email address, an idea for a blog title, and even the color scheme that they may want on their blog.

3. After students have set up a blog, they will need some guidance on how to maneuver this new literacy. Based on your experience from the past summer, you will teach them the basics of creating a new post and publishing the post. This can be done in a school computer lab as students follow along on separate computers, or just in the classroom with the teacher's individual computer and a projector. You may show the students the blog that you created over the summer, so the students may see the end result.

4. After students have gained some insight into how to use blogger, it is important to create an environment that allows students to have concepts and ideas to write about. We suggest that literature be the crux of the blog. We believe that students are more involved

with literature if they have some choice in what they are reading. Similarly, we believe that students should have choice in what they are writing. At this point, students will need to decide what they will be writing about on their blog. Some possible ideas might include,

    a. Book recommendations for friends

    b. Book reviews

    c. Book summaries

    d. Character sketches

    e. Book setting descriptions

    f. Opinion pieces

    g. Blog debate

The ideas are endless. Blogs can be a mash-up of several of the ideas listed or be an entire blog devoted to just one, whatever the student prefers.

5. We recommend that students be made aware of their peers' blogs. After students have created a blog and begun posting entries, it is beneficial to allow time for students to peruse through and read their classmates posts. It is possible that students may learn of a new book that they are interested in or learn about a new topic. During this stage, as students are perusing classmates' blogs, we encourage them to continue the conversation adding their thoughts to classmates' blog posts by responding in the comments section—again including another writing component to our literature based blogs.

6. Throughout the rest of the year, students will continue blogging about the literature they are reading as well as reading other students' work. The blog forum is a space where students' work and peer commentary can be saved.

7. Toward the end of the year, we recommend (if funds allow) turning the students work into a book. There are several different websites that will publish the blog into a hard cover book. One idea is to allow the students to plan an end of the year party where students view one another's final work. This will allow students to celebrate their accomplishment as well as give them something to look forward to throughout the school year.

What are the benefits? We believe that the benefits to blogging are great. Of course, the most important benefit is that students are connecting two important subjects (reading and writing) that are so often separated. Students have the ability to write about literature that they are reading. It is possible that students may be more willing to write in such a format when they know others will be reading it. Blog writing is also closer in format to writing in which many youth are already actively participating. Creating an online format where students can link important educational concepts with social media is definitely a benefit of this activity. Similarly, by reading and commenting on peers' blogs the literature conversation continues. Conversing with peers and engaging in *thoughtful literacy* (Allington, 2012) allows students to further their understanding of literary topics. Additionally, by opening the blog to a more public forum other individuals outside the classroom may also participate in the conversation begun by the students. Students will then experience the authentic way that blogs are used in everyday life.

What are the challenges? Of course intertwining technology into the classroom can be a challenge. In order to compose blogs, students need access to a computer and Internet. While students don't need their own computer, they do need some access. If teachers do not have access to a computer, this activity would not be an option. However, it is always possible to

write blog posts by hand and transfer them to a computer if limited computers are available. Similarly, if computers are available that do not have internet access, it is possible for students to write their posts in a word processor and copy and paste them into a web-based entry as soon as they receive a computer with internet access.

One challenge of incorporating blog posts into the classroom is the technological expertise needed by the teacher. In order to walk students through setting up a blog post, creating a new entry, and viewing peers' blogs, some knowledge about computers and the Internet is vital. Of course, this is why we recommend that teachers spend the summer before perusing blogger.com and setting up their own blog. We believe the benefits of students being able to write about their literature experience in a public forum where peers, teachers, and family can view the student's writing far outweigh the difficulty of implementing such a program.

Graphic Depiction

Every teacher, in his or her career, has heard at least one student complain, "I hate writing!" With our experience in public schools, we often heard this complaint. The following practical implication can be used for students who struggle with writing and may need some scaffolding to prepare them for long written prose.

What is it? A graphic depiction is an avenue to tell a story with minimal prose and plentiful graphics. A graphic depiction could be in the form of a cartoon strip, a comic book, or even a detailed graphic organizer.

How is it implemented? All of the ideas recalled in this article connect two important concepts: reading and writing. Similarly, we believe that creating a graphic depiction can also be used in accordance with literature that students are reading. Students may engage in a chapter book (that does not have images) and want to create a comic book version of the book. Students

may also create an alternate ending to a book through the use of graphics. Additionally, students could use ideas given in nonfiction texts and turn them into a story. The possibilities to this practical strategy are endless. Below are some steps to consider.

Possible steps:

1. Allow students to engage in student choice literature

2. View examples of graphic novels

3. Create student(s)' own graphic depiction of literature

   a. Engage students in the five steps of the writing process (brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing)

4. Students share their graphic depiction with the class and/or add the piece to the classroom library. Additionally, these depictions could be scanned and shared in a more public forum with parents or other individuals or schools throughout the nation and world. In this way, students might connect with others who share their interests or learn more about graphic novels that others are reading.

What are the benefits? As noted earlier, the reading-writing connection may be quite beneficial for struggling readers. If students grapple with writing lengthy prose, graphic depictions may allow them to make the reading-writing connection without focusing too much on an area of weakness. This activity also may be an area that can act as a scaffold for future writing. Students can use written words through speech bubbles, thought bubbles and even sound effects. It may be particularly beneficial for students who love to read comic books. Graphic depictions might also be beneficial for artists who love to draw and create visual representations. Most importantly, though, this activity may help struggling readers make the bridge between reading and writing in an authentic and fun way.

What are the challenges? A possible challenge to this educational experience is the lack of graphic novels and/or comic books in the classroom. As previous teachers, we both had to make a special effort to find great examples of this type of work, as it was not readily available in our classroom libraries or even our school library. In order for students to create their own graphic depiction, they must be familiar with the genre. Lack of access may impede familiarity. Of course, we believe with a little extra work, (e.g., searching at local book stores and searching online) teachers may find examples for children.

Another possible challenge could be explaining this sort of activity as worthwhile to parents and/or administrators. It is possible that others may view this as "play" instead of "school work." Administrators and parents may have to be convinced of this activity's importance. It is important to note that graphic depictions encourage children to participate in the writing process: brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing while simultaneously bridging the gap between reading and writing.

Pen Pal Responses to Literature

One activity that may encourage both dialogue and written responses between students, in terms of literature, is the development of a literacy partnership between two classrooms. This can provide students with another opportunity to engage in *thoughtful literacy* (Allington, 2012) with other students. During this partnership students can form a real connection with peers as well as practice communication activities (Nelson & Calfee, 1998) through reading and writing.

What is it? This activity is based on a much-implemented idea of classroom pen pals. For decades, teachers have been pairing with classrooms in other towns, states, or countries as a motivational tool to encourage their students to write letters, to learn to communicate through the written word. This variation on the traditional notion of pen pal letter writing involves bridging

the reading and writing connection by adding a literature component. In addition to forming relationships with their pen pal through writing about the daily components of their lives, this strategy involved encouraging students to write about the books they read. Implementation of this strategy involved some careful planning on the part of both participating teachers.

In our experience, we attempted to pair students who were more likely to have similar literature interests. For example, we had boys who showed strong interest in reading nonfiction pieces about animals, and another set of students who were fascinated by Roald Dahl books. Of course, this process was far from perfect, but we were able to generally match students with a pen pal who had similar interest in terms of books, magazines, etc. It is important to note that both our classrooms promoted wide reading and choice. Therefore, students had the opportunity to make their own selections in terms of reading material and were given access to a wide range of choices ranging from nonfiction and fiction texts to magazines to comics. We believed that by dialoguing with another student from a different class we would encourage reflection, expose our students to new text possibilities, and encourage the reading/writing connection in an authentic way.

How is it implemented?

1. Implementing pen pals with a focus on literature involves finding another teacher who is willing to participate. We would argue that this person should have similar views about literacy. For us, this meant finding a like-minded individual who believed in student choice, wide reading, and the importance of dialoguing about books. In the past, this might have involved contacting a teacher and classroom in close proximity to one's own school. However, with the entre of the virtual world

communication can be bridged across the world. It is no longer difficult to establish relationships with classrooms in varying places.

2. Next, you and your partner teacher must agree on the frequency of responses. How often will you commit to having your students respond? What is reasonable in terms of your schedule?

3. Then, you must pair your students based on their interests. This may warrant a face-to-face meeting between you and your partner teacher, or if that is not possible at least a detailed email or phone call.

4. Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, you will need to scaffold the process with your students. For many of them, engaging in an oral dialogue about books may be unfamiliar. Participating in a dialogue through letter writing may be especially difficult. We modeled letters and exchanges for our students as well as gave individual guidance during writing conferences in order to provide appropriate support through a seemingly difficult process.

What Are the Benefits? The benefits of implementing pen pals with a literature focus are vast. It may give students the opportunity to reflect more deeply about the text they are reading and to form opinions and to defend those opinions. By putting their thoughts in written form, they can solidify them in a manner that would have been less likely in casual, oral conversation. Our students also learned about new books they had never heard of and sought out these books. A suggestion from their pen pal often times held more weight than one from an adult. Thus, many of our students began exploring other texts that they might not have previously considered. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, our students learned that the act of

reading does not have to be a lonely and arduous process. Rather, it can be a fun way to build connections and engage in exciting dialogue.

What are the challenges? This project may involve a bit of work on the front end. However, in our experience, once we had the system down things began to work very smoothly. In addition, it took some time to convince a few of our students that the process was worthwhile. At the beginning, some saw it as just one more tedious assignment. However, toward the end of the year the students formed relationships and the activity became more exciting. The students always looked forward to receiving a letter addressed to them.

Conclusion

In the beginning of this article, we recounted how a personal daily schedule instructionally separated reading and writing; two subjects that are reciprocal. After some reflection, we changed our schedule to better align reading and writing. We implemented reading and writing activities that had Shanahan's (1988) seven instructional principles at the foundation. We ensured the that our strategies included the following: (a) reading and writing are taught together, (b) reading and writing is introduced early on, (c) the developmental nature of reading is considered, (d) the reading and writing connection is made explicit, (e) content and process relations are emphasized, (f) communications are emphasized, and (g) reading and writing are taught in meaningful contexts. By including blogs, graphic depictions, and pen pals, we began to create an environment where our students no longer separated their "reading brains" from their "writing brains." When we began implementing authentic reading and writing activities that no longer felt like "busy work" we no longer heard the cries, "Why are we writing during reading time?" Rather, our students appreciated the conjunction of reading and writing activities because

they were purposeful and relative to their lives. Many struggling readers enjoyed literacy activities for the first time and the transfer was powerful.

In a broader context, we believe that the reading and writing connection can only be implemented through authentic, student-based instruction in which children make active choices about the texts with which they engage. In our experience, scripted programs, magic bullets, and one size fits all programs can never meet the criteria of authentic reading and writing instruction. Therefore, we encourage schools to allow teachers the cognitive space to experiment with activities such as the ones we have suggested.

Discussion Questions:

1. What have you done in your classroom to link the two subjects of reading and writing? What have you done that may have created a chasm between the two?

2. What ideas do you have about how to create a classroom environment that encourages thoughtful literacy?

3. What benefits or challenges do you foresee in your own classroom in terms of the application of the strategies mentioned in the article?

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