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In the Classroom: Details, Details, Details (Nov. '90)


Michael P. French

Lourdes University, mfrench@lourdes.edu

Kathy Everts Danielson

University of Nebraska at Omaha, kdanielson@unomaha.edu

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IN THE CLASSROOM

Michael P. French, Bowling Green State University

Kathy Everts Danielson, University of Nebraska at Omaha

Details, details, details

Rona F. Flippo

Judy Anderson Smith

Amy was a fine oral reader. She seemed to be a well-adjusted third-grader who loved to play games. But Amy could not remember any details of the paragraphs she read when given an informal reading inventory. Amy was a student selected to participate in a practicum in reading diagnosis.

We decided that Amy could benefit from work on noticing and remembering details. From an interest inventory we learned that Amy loved games and her kitten, so we came up with an activity that would help her remember details, incorporating these two loves.

To begin, we asked Amy to develop her own working definition of *details*. With a minimum of assistance, Amy decided that details were the small parts that make up the big picture. This definition was put into action by playing the game 20 Questions, which would focus Amy's attention on details. To play 20 Questions, Amy chose an item in the room without telling us what she had selected. We asked questions trying to discover the object she had in mind. After we guessed the object, we would then select one and Amy would ask the questions.

Once Amy was focused on details, we introduced an activity related to Amy's definition of details. Amy was given a small jigsaw puzzle with kittens on it. Once she had assembled the puzzle, it was examined for details. Next, the puzzle was covered, and we separately wrote down all the details we could remember.

Amy was now focusing on details. Linking important details to the big picture was done through various

means. First, we talked about how important each puzzle piece was to the picture. One piece was taken away, and we talked about how the picture could not be complete without it. Next, we tied this concept to functional reading. For example, we talked about the importance of remembering a detail in the newspaper, such as the time a movie begins. We also discussed the importance of details like the amount of flour she would use to make her birthday cake. These verbal pictures were the first steps we used to bring Amy from visualizing details in the puzzle to reading for details. The final steps, which enabled Amy to have a firm grasp on the importance of details in a story, were covered in subsequent sessions.

Each of those sessions began with a game of 20 Questions to focus Amy's attention on details. Following this, Amy read actual stories, newspaper articles, etc., in which some of the important details had been deleted. These missing details altered the stories enough that answering the questions and retelling the stories were difficult. Other times we would read together and simply discuss details in stories. We would then follow up by asking Amy to list the details that she could remember from what we had just read.

We also read illustrated stories in which the text described the pictures. Initially we would keep the pictures hidden from Amy and have her use the details from the stories to recreate these pictures accurately. Then we would show her the illustrations. At other times, we wrote our own descriptive stories, and Amy drew pictures to depict the details of these stories.

Success in helping Amy understand

the importance of details and remembering details was documented by several informal assessments given to her at the end of the practicum sessions. Her ability to enhance and retell stories also was improved dramatically: Amy could write, illustrate, and tell her own stories with fine detail.

Flippo is an associate professor of Reading Education at Fitchburg State College in Fitchburg, Massachusetts. Smith is an undergraduate teacher education major at this same institution.

Reading and writing informational texts

Joyce Joranko

Most teachers incorporate a period of sustained silent reading into each day's lesson plan, and most teachers read aloud to students, but I suspect that much of the reading done during these periods involves fiction. Therefore, I felt a need to find a way to encourage my fourth- and fifth-grade students to read informational books and to use this as a base for writing.

As many elementary teachers do, I read aloud daily, and students have a sustained silent reading period. They choose their own material which is usually narrative. I decided to introduce a *second* sustained silent reading period each day during which students must read in what I call a topic book. These are expository materials found in the nonfiction section of the library. They select their own books and read as much of any book as they choose.

Students in my class have ample

time to visit the school library, and I make available a collection of titles that correspond to the subjects they are studying in science and social studies. I may also select books by well-known authors of informational books. Popular titles in my classroom are books by Patricia Lauber (*Your Body and How It Works*, *Too Much Garbage*, *Great Whales*, and *Who Discovered America?*) and George Ancona (*Bananas: From Manolo to Margie* and *Turtle Watch*). By reading books like these, students become familiar with informational book authors and their works just as they would their favorite fiction writers.

Often we talk about text structures found in topic books and compare them to the narrative structures of the stories I read aloud and those in the fiction books they self select. We also examine actual graphic features of the page, and students are encouraged to experiment with these structures and features in their own writing.

Twice a week we do my version of Writing Workshop. Students may write stories, poems, or expository pieces, but they are strongly encouraged to write on topics that they have read about. Students often retrieve what they have put into their own memory through the reading they have done.

I conference with each child regarding his or her piece of writing. The child reads it aloud to me, and we discuss revision and editing. When the student has revised the piece, it is placed into the class notebook to be shared. Individual pieces are not graded; rather, each students' collection is given one grade at the end of a marking period.

I see my students grow in several areas relating to reading, writing, and knowledge acquisition. Through my program I feel that I have built in the transition from reading fiction to reading in the content areas, making my students increasingly comfortable reading their content texts and writing informational texts. They are increasing their bank of information, which they use both in writing and for prior knowledge in reading comprehension.

Our current class notebook reflects a wide range of topics such as space, sled dogs, Thanksgiving, bats,

weather, electing presidents, microscopes, dinosaurs of the past, national landmarks, parents, the importance of school, caves, and the Sonoran Desert. Reading nonfiction is an excellent strategy to promote variety in students' own writing and topic selection.

Joranko is a fourth- and fifth-grade teacher at Crowell School in Albion, Michigan.

The teacher writes: Before and for children

Ann Horn

One of the more important factors in helping beginning writers is the teacher's modeling of the writing process. By writing in front of the children, pausing to think aloud, asking the children for suggestions about what should be changed or come next, re-reading, and pondering the choice of words and title, the teacher has a unique opportunity to discuss the writing process and the thinking that accompanies it.

For example, after reading Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* to the students, I wrote the following:

A very large fuzzy creature with orange hair and purple eyes knocked on my door yesterday. It startled me by saying, "I am looking for a place to buy some running shoes. Can you tell me where I can find some pink ones with purple polka dots?"

I asked my students, "Where could this large, fuzzy creature with orange hair and purple eyes find pink running shoes with purple polka dots in size 24?" The class responded with a number of ideas that I paused to consider. I chose two to include in the story.

I asked some of my friends for ideas. They had good ones, like walking to a junkyard to find boots or going without shoes.

"But I want shoes, not boots, and I am tired of going barefoot," answered my fuzzy new friend. "Help me, please."

"Shall I help this creature, children?" I asked. At this point I read the

story as it had thus far unfolded. I thought and thought and thought and finally said: "How could I help? Would a big idea make big shoes? I know how I'll solve this problem. Let's see if it will work."

As author, I was responsible for the solution. Children need to see that they, as authors, also have authority over the direction of their writing.

"Let's try this and see if it will work. Go back to the shoe store and buy some size 2 shoes that are pink with purple polka dots. Then buy two magnifying glasses. Bring them and the little shoes to me."

My fuzzy friend returned with a tiny shoe on each baby finger and the magnifying glasses in a bag. The creature watched, amazed, as I placed the shoes and the magnifying glasses in hot water in the bathtub. Before our eyes the shoes grew bigger and bigger and bigger until the creature yelled, "Stop! They are big enough! Size 24!"

As my story took form that day before the class, the tiny shoes did not find themselves in hot water in a bathtub but were merely on the receiving end of vague, unspecified magic. The tub was added in my rewrite before it was placed with the children's edited stories in the published collection for classroom reading. The children well understand that, during the process of writing and rewriting, changes and additions are necessary.

Happily, my fuzzy friend put on the beautiful running shoes, pink with purple polka dots, size 24! I put on my running shoes, dirty white, size 7. We ran to the park and jogged around it 24 times.

Originally, as I wrote and read this story aloud, 25 laps were run around the park, but Danny piped up with the observation that it would be better to make it 24 because the shoes in the story were size 24. He was right! All writers, including teachers, need to hear from others and, after careful consideration and as a matter of choice, be willing to relinquish their words and incorporate the new ideas of their audience into their works.

The matter of a title was open to class discussion with the observation that authors often wait to choose the title until the story is completed. "Big

Shoes," "The Monster," "Running Shoes," and "Pink Shoes with Purple Polka Dots" were eagerly suggested. What should it be? Again, the author retained the right to decide. "Running Shoes" it would be.

For those children who find the plunge into writing a formidable prospect, modeling provides a springboard. After thinking about the general theme, hold a brief discussion about possible writing ideas. While writing a first draft, instruct the children to stop frequently to reread and ask questions of their text and of themselves, as their teacher has done: "In what ways can this problem be solved? Which would be best? What makes that character different from the others? How would I feel if I were that character?"

The teacher should remain available as a resource during the writing process for children who need help in thinking aloud. The children should also work cooperatively to clarify thinking, read their drafts, and question each other about their stories.

Many children write themselves into their stories, having contrived a meeting with a monster, much as had their second-grade teacher. Stacia wrote: "One sunny morning a fuzzy, furry creature rang my doorbell..." Like my creature, Stacia's was at her door, but she was to help find its mommy, not running shoes. Her own solicitous character showed through her writing.

Michelle wrote: "A little monster was walking, and I was sitting on the porch. He walked up to me and said, 'Hello. I am Beemis. Will you be my friend?'" Perhaps the little monster spoke of Michelle's own search for relationships, a universal theme heard even in early childhood.

After heeding my suggestion that she ask herself for more details about her funny little creature, 7-year-old Jennifer wrote: "One day I saw a funny little creature at my doorstep. He said to me he was 7 feet long and 7 years old." To deal with others her own age seemed to be Jennifer's desire.

Eric and his monster borrowed the shoe store and large shoe idea with extravagance: "We went to the shoe store, and we got some shoes. I asked him what size he wears, and he said he wears size 2,050."

Special shoes were important to Michael's story also:

I saw a wild thing in my backyard doing the hula dance, but he had a problem. He did not have any dancing shoes. I asked him to come in...He broke the floor because he weights [sic] 2,050 pounds. I told him that there is a great store selling nice dancing shoes. "But do they have size 89?"

Did Michael borrow his huge numeral from Eric, or Eric from Michael as they worked together? Their stories took different directions, so it doesn't matter.

Teacher modeling of the writing process provides a strong impetus for children to learn to assume authority for transforming their thoughts and emotions into inventive, diverse stories. Students often emulate the language and sentence structure modeled by the teacher and other children. It is gratifying to identify elements of the others' writing incorporated into the children's narratives, not as imitation that limits creativity, but as voices expressing uniqueness.

Horn teaches second grade at Fiegel Elementary School of the Plymouth-Canton Community Schools in Plymouth, Michigan.

A school newspaper: The Crown Press

Judy Kissell

During Newspaper in Education month, a group of third-grade students and I decided to put together a newspaper for our school, Crown Elementary. The outcome was so well received that we decided to publish four editions throughout the year using different students as editors for each edition. Here are the procedures we used to publish our issues of The Crown Press.

Session 1

Step 1. We began by looking at several different newspapers in our area to obtain an understanding of the types of things that are found in newspapers and

the way in which papers are laid out. Students discovered items such as want ads, comics, interviews and articles.

Step 2. Next students brainstormed events and people at our school that would be newsworthy. This was difficult for the children, and there was much discussion among the group, but finally they were able to come up with the news that they wanted to print.

Step 3. Article writing assignments were agreed upon by the group. Some students conducted interviews with specific school staff members; some wrote articles about past or upcoming events; some wrote riddles or drew cartoons. Students were to have completed the interviews and written a rough draft of the articles by our second meeting the following week.

Session 2

Step 1. When the children brought their drafts to the following meeting, we discussed the editing process. We made a list of things that we would be looking for in one another's articles as we edited them. Spelling was the most obvious concern, but, in time, we came up with the following list:

1. Will other people be interested in the material?
2. Is the material easy to read and understand?
3. Is the spelling correct?
4. Are complete sentences used?
5. Is correct punctuation used?

Step 2. The children read their own articles and were encouraged to revise and edit them as needed.

Step 3. The children exchanged articles and proofread each other's articles. After agreeing on a final form, the articles were ready to go into the computer.

Session 3

The children entered their articles on the computer, saved them, and printed them. The articles were printed in 40-character columns so that they would fit on the paper newspaper-style.

Session 4

Our next meeting was spent cutting and pasting articles and deciding on the name for our paper. Because our

school is called Crown Elementary, the name of our paper became The Crown Press.

The students had a wonderful time arranging and organizing the paper and began to talk about what would go in our next edition. This prompted me to give all the children an opportunity to be a newspaper reporter and to have their work published. Students began thinking about other kinds of material to include such as movie and book reviews, advice columns, and editorials.

After the children had put the paper together, I had enough copies made for everyone in our school. The principal and teachers loved our first issue, but, most importantly, the students loved their newspaper.

Kissell is the Reading Director at Crown Elementary School in Coronado, California.

Short snappers for daily writing

Monique Gratrix
Ruth Hayden

"Are your students journaled out?" My sixth-grade students had been exposed to journal writing for several years, so when I (Monique) suggested it, they all groaned. Obviously this writing activity had run its course for them, so I planned for quick, daily writing tasks that needed little teacher preparation time but promoted the idea that writing could be both fun and purposeful.

By creating opportunities for them to produce a quantity of writing, even my reluctant students were successful writers. As the variety of writing tasks grew, students frequently used these products as extenders for their writing folders or as writing samples for future editing and publishing. Listed below are some of the students' favorite writing tasks we developed.

In the bag

Place an interesting object in a brown paper lunch bag. Tape it shut so that no one can look inside. Prepare a bag with a different object for each student. In groups of three or four,

each student feels his or her bag, writes on the bag a good sentence about what he or she thinks is in it, and passes the bag to another group member. This procedure continues until each bag is returned to the child who wrote the first sentence. Each student then writes a paragraph, expanding upon the ideas that are written on the bag. The object is revealed only after the paragraph is shared orally with group peers. As an alternative to teacher-prepared bags, have students bring items from home to be placed in bags.

Likely literature

Select a passage from a novel to read to the class. Selections from *The Pigman* by Paul Zindel, *Skinny Bones* by Barbara Park, or *David* by Annie Sophie Holm are particularly good for upper-elementary children. The choice should be based on the students' interests and background knowledge in order to stimulate their thinking and involvement. Read the passage only to the climax, and let the students write an exciting conclusion that may then be shared with other classmates.

Topic writing

Topic writing enables students to explore their feelings, attitudes, and anxieties. Ideas for topic writing might include:

1. Twenty things I want to do before I am 40.
2. Ten things that make me cry.
3. I get angry when...
4. If I could go back in time, I would go to...
5. When I am a parent, I will let my child...
6. The things I could change about school are...

Scavenger hunt

Divide the students into groups. Direct each group to make up a list of six different writings that another group must locate. The first group to collect everything on the list is the winner. If an item cannot be found, a group member must compose the missing sample. A group's list might include the following:

1. A memo from the principal's office
2. A letter to/from someone you know
3. Short poem written by a peer
4. A nonedited story from a classmate's writing folder
5. A bibliography of the five most favorite books in the library
6. Directions from a (safe) cleaning product

Rambling on

For 2 minutes, have students write about anything that comes into their mind. If they cannot think of something to write about, then they can write about that. If they cannot think what should come next, suggest that they continue to write the last word on their page until a new idea does come to them.

Whoppers

Start this activity by telling the class a huge whopper about someone or something they all know about. Then give the students 5 minutes to add to your whopper or to make up one of their own. Be sure to let them share their exaggerations with their friends. Examples from Paul Bunyan's life are a good starting point in providing students with models of whoppers.

Pass it on

Have the students sit in groups of three or four. At your signal, ask each student to begin writing a story. After 2 minutes, have students pass their stories to the person on their left. Then they must read the story they have received and proceed to add to it for another 2 minutes. Continue this procedure until students get their own story back. Conclude by having them write an ending to the story.

Bowl of words

Have the students fill an old goldfish bowl with some interesting word cards. You may want to get them started with some neat sounding words like *abracadabra*, *bamboozle*, *ghastly*, *buzz* or some "sense" words like *putrid*, *savory*, *rank*, *twitch*, *scaly*, *gooey*, *crumble*, *crash*, *bang*. Pass the bowl around so that students can each choose one or two words, and have

them use these words as starters for a poem, story, joke, or short paragraph. Encourage the students to write about the first thing that comes into their minds when they read their selected words.

Our day

Write a class memoir together. Students should be encouraged to share their thoughts and discoveries as you act as the recorder. Select this type of writing task on a day when minidisasters or minicelebrations occur for most of your students (e.g., snow storms, power failures, bus strike, pet day, field trips).

These writing tasks helped build a sense of author community in Monique's classroom. Students were less reluctant to start their writing tasks or share their writing efforts with the class. Together we grew as writers and enjoyed the process more.

Gratrix is a teacher at St. Augustine School in Ponoka, Alberta, Canada. Hayden is an associate professor at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada.

Successful peer conferencing

Jean M. Daly

Peer conferencing is an important part of the writing process. However, it is difficult to monitor the conferences, and children often stray from the task so the results are less than expected. The temptation for us teachers to collect the papers, get out the red pencil, and revise the pieces ourselves is great. However, I have found that with a little structure, modeling, and practice, peer conferencing can become a rewarding experience for both students and the teacher.

I organized my class for peer conferencing using cooperative learning guidelines for team setups. Specifically, I placed an equal number of students on each team. I was careful to distribute students according to ability so that each team was heterogeneous. I had 20 students, so I formed four groups of five students each.

To help the students remain on task, I developed a set of Peer Conference Cards that were printed on 8 × 12 colored construction paper and laminated. There was one set of cards for each group of students.

1. Card A was the *Reader Card*. It directed the chosen reader to perform these tasks for the group: (a) Tell the group which part you want them to listen to with special care. It may be a new beginning you tried. It may be a new ending. You may need suggestions for a title, or you may only want an audience to hear your piece. (b) Read your piece twice to your listeners. Do it clearly and slowly.

2. Card B was the *Summarizer Card*. This task required the student to summarize what he or she heard from the reader. The card suggests formats for the Summarizer to use. For example:

"I heard you say...."
"Your main point was...."
"This is what I heard...."

3. Card C was the *Questioner Card*. It directed the conference member to ask questions such as:

"Could you tell me more about...?"
"Will you explain more about...?"
"Could you please clarify this part for me...?"

4. Card D was the *Suggester Card*. It directed a child to make suggestions to the author based on group conversation. This card offered possible suggestions such as:

"These possible titles came to me as you read for us...."
"Have you thought about trying...?"
"Have you talked with...? He/she had the same problem before."

5. Card E was the *Praiser Card*. It gave hints about how to praise the au-

thor and the piece. Some suggested praises on this card were:

"I liked the part where you...."
"I especially enjoyed...."
"You made me (laugh, cry, smile) when you...."
"You really made some good changes in this draft."

6. Card F was the *Observer Card*. I prepared this one in case groups needed rearranging at the last minute due to absences or additions to the class. The holder kept a checklist and marked it off as each group member completed his or her task.

When each member had a turn to use a card, the floor was open for any member of the group to add closing comments. The cards were rotated clockwise around the group until each member had been the reader.

The author often made notes as peers spoke and then decided what to do with the information the peer group offered. The author maintained ownership of the piece, and the decision to act or not act upon the information obtained in the peer conference resided solely with the author.

When I first introduced these cards to my class, we modeled the procedure using a group of volunteers. I stood nearby to coach members if they got confused. Within a week, the class no longer needed modeling. Within 2 to 3 weeks, I noticed less dependence on the cards and more confidence in my students' peer conferencing skills. Now I no longer pass out the cards, although occasionally a group will take the cards and use them for the session. Peer conferencing has become an efficient use of classroom time, and student writing does benefit from the process.

Daly teaches fifth grade at Setauket Elementary School of Three Village School District in Setauket, New York.

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