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## RECYCLING AN "OLD IDEA": DIALOGUE JOURNALS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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I am XXXXX and i'm live in XXXXX. I have three sister's and one of them is my twain.

I learn art in the school and in my free time i paintur and dancing.

my favorite calure is pink and all the things in my room is pink.

This message, which appeared on a discussion forum, was written by a weak eleventh-grade student. Is it a disaster or a success? I call it a success because the student wrote. From continued correspondence with the student I learned that she hated to write in English. This was the first of many messages.

No doubt, writing is difficult – even more so in a foreign language. However, the only way to learn how to write is to write. Writing, like speaking, is a communicative act, which needs a purpose and an audience. It is essential in order to develop language skills and as such, we, as teachers, want to provide as many opportunities for writing as possible. Yet, when faced with a blank page and a pencil, many of our students freeze. Few are enthusiastic about putting their ideas down on paper – for many, many reasons. What can we do to provide opportunities to write and how can we get our students to actually write?

### **Approaches to Writing**

There are two general approaches to writing: free writing and process writing. Free writing is usually not edited nor worked on. It can take various forms, may be kept private or shared and is usually not graded. In contrast, process writing entails pre-writing, writing and revising stages before the final draft is shared with an audience (although a teacher may provide feedback at various stages) and assessed resulting in a final grade. Both writing approaches are important in the development of overall writing skills. In my experience, students perceive free writing activities as less difficult and less threatening.

### **Dialogue Journals**

Dialogue journals are “free writing” conversations, in which a learner and a teacher (or other writing partner) converse on a regular basis, discussing a variety of topics of shared interest. As a participant in the conversation, the teacher responds to the content of the writing, adding comments and / or asking questions rather than as an evaluator who corrects, assesses, grades and comments on the quality of the writing. As such, the journal provides the learner with multiple and diverse opportunities to use English (reading and writing) in a supportive non-threatening communicative interaction, which is also in an authentic and natural context.

There are additional benefits to dialogue journals besides just writing. Since the primary focus of journal writing is the sharing of ideas, the teacher’s written response provides the learner with reading texts and models of language (form, structure and style) as well as with a stimulus for additional writing. Furthermore, both the learner and the teacher have an opportunity to discuss issues that they may not ordinarily talk about, developing the English teacher’s role as that of educator.

Some teachers, as well as some students, worry that without overt correction of the writing sample learning will not occur. Since it is considered a free writing activity, correction and assessment are not the primary purpose. However, there are ways in which the teacher can provide feedback for learning without interrupting the flow of communication. By providing a holistic response with instructive feedback, the focus of the interaction is the message and not the assessment (see “Responding: Using Instructive Feedback” below).

### **Internet Discussion Forums: Digital Dialogue Journals**

Why should we use Internet discussion forums as dialogue journals instead of paper and pencil journals? What added advantages are gained by changing the medium? First of all, we should take into consideration that many of today's students feel more at ease in front of a screen and keyboard than they do staring at a piece of paper and holding a pencil. In fact, I am sometimes amazed at how quickly fingers hunt and peck across the keyboard. We should also not forget the "fun factor" associated with computers.

The technology is readily available and accessible to most students. Most schools have a school website which includes forums and is open to students. Although not all the students have computers at home and / or Internet access, most schools have computer facilities, which are available for student use. Therefore, participation on a discussion forum can be done together as a class in the school computer room as part of the lesson and / or as a homework assignment. Time and place is a decision best left to the teacher.

When writing on a discussion forum, learners develop a sense of audience. Instead of writing just to the teacher, they are now addressing a wider audience. When discussing a particular topic, ideas are shared. The various messages are read and judged for content rather than quality of writing. Studies have shown that ESL students who participate in forums tend to write more, use a greater variety of language functions, including asking and answering questions. As a result, they become less inhibited about writing.

The connection between reading and writing is strengthened. In order to respond to a message, it has to be read. Students are often eager to see what their peers have written. Not all students will respond but studies show that as the online community bonds, students begin to reply to one another. This is especially true if the topic under discussion is of high interest and allows for a variety of opinions.

Discussion forums allow for equal opportunities for expression. In large classes, most students do not have an opportunity to speak or voice their ideas. Discussions are often dominated by the same minority of students. Students who are hesitant to express themselves in class have an opportunity to use the language in an authentic setting and

for an authentic purpose. Their postings will be read and related to equally to those of the more vocal students in the classroom. In fact, some of the quieter students may be quite “talkative” on forums. Although students are free writing, they have time to both think out the ideas and formulate the language to express these ideas.

### **Responding: Using Instructive Feedback**

We can adapt the format of feedback used in dialogue journals for Internet discussion forums. As in dialogue journals, feedback is holistic, relating primarily to the content. However, the feedback should be instructive in some way so that it provides an opportunity for learning. In general, the response (feedback) should be directive, questioning as well as serving as a model of accurate and correct use of language. Taking into consideration that our feedback is public, what are some ways we can respond to messages and provide instructive feedback?

- Respond to the message directly and personally. Relate to the content and the message the writer is trying to convey.
- Respond promptly. Students are expecting a reply. Their message is still fresh and any feedback is more likely to be more effective if the response is prompt. This takes both commitment and time on the part of the teachers.
- Be sensitive. This is especially important because your replies are public. If there is a need to criticize the content, for example, an inappropriate message on a discussion forum, explain what you expect and tell the writer that future inappropriate messages will be deleted. From my experience, it only happens once.
- Compliment and encourage. My purpose for using discussion forums is to get students to write and overcome the fear of writing.
- Be a model. Use the sentence structure and vocabulary from the message in your reply therefore providing a correct model.
- Share your experiences. Students are naturally curious about you! Post your own message on the forum.

### **From the Field**

Internet discussion forums are being used in schools around the country. Below are sample messages and responses (note the instructive feedback) from an online course that I have been co-teaching during the past few months. The students are weak to average 4 and 5 pointers preparing for the D Bagrut module.

The following dialogue occurred at the beginning of the course in a discussion forum in which students were asked to introduce themselves to me – the online teacher. The students are in the same class so they know one another; therefore, most of the interaction was directed to me. In my responses, I related to the content but also provided feedback.

First message by the student in the forum:

My name is XX XXXX,

I live in Jhorden Vally in XXXXX.

I have 3 sister and i'm the litle sister, my first sister get mered and she have a boy.

I like to do in my free time...sleep, computer, T.V, denc

### **Teacher reply**

Hi XXX,

Nice to meet you! It is nice to have a married sister who has a child. It must be fun to be an aunt and you have a nephew!

I live in Tel Aviv, which is far from the Jordan Valley. However, I like to visit there when I can. It is very beautiful.

I hope to see you online often.

### **Student reply**

How are you?

I love to be an aunt. Ilike the nphew.

I don't love the Tal Aviv I don't like to live in city.

**Teacher reply**

Hi XXX,

I like being an aunt too. I have 2 nieces and 2 nephews. What do you like to do with your nephew?

I know there are many people who do not like Tel Aviv or big cities. I love them!!  
However, I like small quiet places too. Why don't you like Tel Aviv or big cities?

**Student reply**

Hi, good morning,

I don't like big cities because I can't live with many people,

And I love quiet places.

XXXX

In this discussion forum, students were asked to post a review of a movie. This particular course contains a writing tutorial reviewing how to write a movie review, relating to the structure and features of the movie review as a text type. Below are two reviews that were posted and the teacher response.

**Sample 1**

The Lord Of The Rings.

The lord of the rings is a fantasy book wich specs about a young hobit hows axidently getting a magic ring that bilongs to the most powerfool lord of all. He nids to go dip in to the dark lords land to "mauntain dom" and distroy the ring.

Debbie Lahav - ETAI Forum - Summer 2005

but what is happening when the dark lord finds out that the Hobbit has the ring? do the young Hobbit succeed on his mission to destroy the ring of the dark lord? what will happen if the Hobbit cote?

I think that the movie is fantastic and very attractive. it will track you for two hours to the screen in every movie of the trilogy.

though the director changes the scripts and gives to some characters parts which they don't belong to them.

lingoid the movie though.

XXX

### **Teacher reply**

Hi XXX,

I have seen one of the movies, but your description gives a good idea about the trilogy for someone who hasn't seen any of the series at all.

Do all the movies have the same characters? Do all the movies take place in the same setting? Did the same director direct all three movies?

Your review of *The Lord of the Rings* really follows the guidelines you were given. A good review!

### **Sample 2**

A Movie Review.

"Shall we dance?"

One man back from his work in the train, he sees a dance club and a beautiful lady standing behind the window.

The club and the lady attract him and he decides to learn dance in this club.

He find that he very love to dance and he become a professional dancer.

He go to the club without tell about this to his wife, and she begin to sepect that his  
husband

Are cheat in her...

My opinion about the movie.

I am very like this movie because he talk about dancing and this subject very interesting.  
The actors are very good and very easy to recognize with they characters that they play.

### **Teacher reply**

Do you also like to dance? Or did you just enjoy it in the movie? I saw the movie too. It was fun.

Your review of *Shall We Dance?* It follows the guidelines you were given. Good job!

So, disaster or success? Using Internet discussion forums as dialogue journals provides learners with natural and authentic opportunities to write in English. Using a free write approach allows students to take risks and experiment with the language. Taking into consideration that we are facing a generation of “screen-agers”, this seems to be a potentially good medium in which to help overcome fears of writing in English and to develop writing skills.

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