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KEEPING IT REAL:  
ENHANCING STUDENT WRITING  
THROUGH THE USE OF  
REAL-LIFE SCENARIOS

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*When Someone Is Taught The Joy Of Learning,  
It Becomes A Life-Long Process That Never Stops,  
A Process That Creates A Logical Individual.  
That Is The Challenge And Joy Of Teaching.*

*Marva Collins*

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## IN THE BEGINNING

When I first started out as a teacher, I had the same concerns and worries that many new teachers often express. I felt that I had to cover a certain amount of material in a certain amount of time. I was afraid to steer away from the teacher's manual at any time for fear that I wouldn't be teaching the students what they were supposed to learn. I was a skill and drill teacher; someone who would cover the curriculum by following the textbook word for word in order to be sure I was doing "the right thing." But what I thought was the right thing, just didn't seem right. I mean, there were no overwhelming feelings of excitement at times when I taught, especially writing. The students just didn't seem as if they were interested in what I was doing. Yet, I stayed "safe" in my teaching practices, using language overheads, language resource pages, and the language book to tell my students how they should be writing.

Many of the students who have come through my fourth grade language classroom door over the years have expressed disgust and frustration when it comes to writing. I often hear things like:

"Aaaaww"

"How many lines does it have to be?"

"Is this getting a grade?"

Somewhere along the way, many students have gained a sense that writing is a chore, an albatross around their necks, rather than a way to express their creativity, thoughts and feelings. Unfortunately, many have learned to view writing as a punishment rather than something that can be fun and enjoyable. They've learned to write for a grade, not for the love of it.

I also found that many students were not allowing themselves to unlock the door to their imaginations and creativity. They would constantly rely on me to reassure them that what they were writing was acceptable or correct. It was as if I had to hold their hand and lead them through every single step. These students didn't seem to be able to connect my writing instruction to their own ideas.

I began to think about ways I could improve students' feelings and attitudes towards writing while making my instruction both fun and meaningful. How could I make writing relevant to their lives? How could I get the students fired up about writing without even making them aware of the fact that the skills they're building are the same ones identified in the language arts series the district has adopted? How could I provide students with a learning experience that they would never forget? Finally, how could I get the students to buy into all of this? I needed to find a way to improve my writing instruction and, in turn, improve my students' writing performance.

The solution came to me while listening to a few students talking on the playground one day. They were pretending to play house and were fighting over who was paying for food and the bills:

**Mitch:** You can't go anywhere...you have to make me dinner!

**Lisa:** I can go where I want, I have money and I'm going shopping.

**Mitch:** Well, you better buy me food!

**Lisa:**[sarcastically] You can afford to buy your own food.

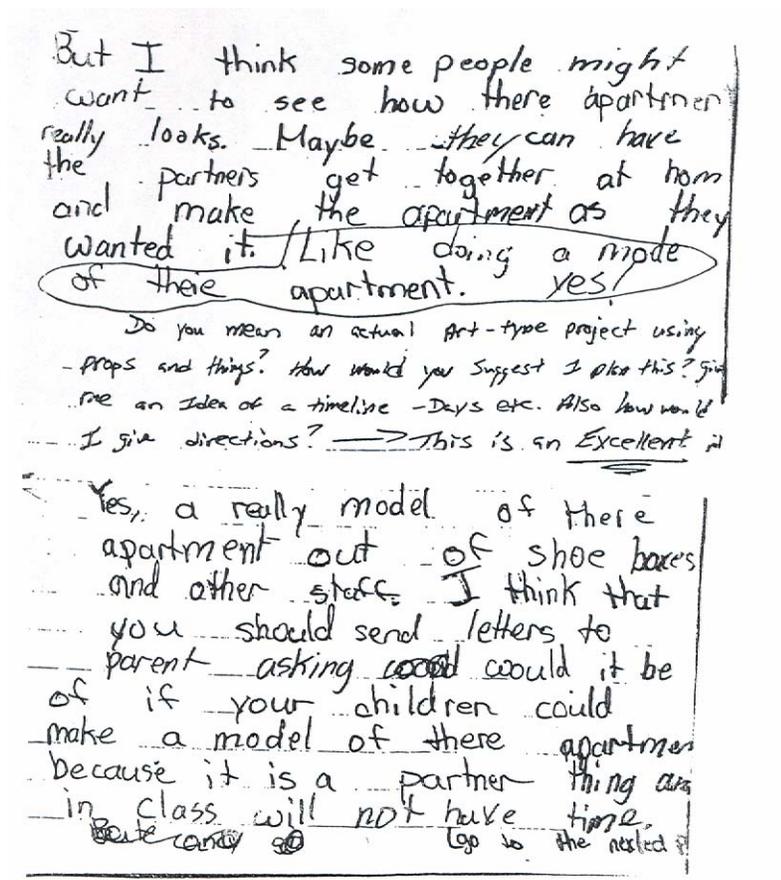
As we made our way back into the classroom, I thought this might make an interesting writing topic, so I asked a few of the students to write down what they had been doing on the playground, what had happened, and why. Their writing simply flowed and the page lit up with colorful words that actually mattered to them. They gave me more than I could've hoped for and much more than they ever gave me in the language arts workbook.

During the spring semester of 2001, I completed a pilot study related to my research question, which at that time asked how I could make writing fun while improving students' overall performance. I was determined to use real life scenarios such as getting a job and renting an apartment to improve students' writing skills. I wanted to do this with the intentions of "tricking" the students into writing quality work without them realizing they were actually working, and I also wanted to provide an opportunity for collateral learning to occur. I wanted students to walk away from this project realizing the value of money, understanding the reasons their parents may not be able to afford \$200 sneakers, and learning how to utilize resources such as the classified ads to take advantage of jobs and purchase goods. I wanted students to know that housing, electric, cable television and other items come with a monthly bill and are not free. I wanted the students to write more, write clearly, effectively organize their thoughts, and successfully convey these thoughts to an audience, all while being creative and paying attention to correctness.

During this pilot study, the students helped to guide the curriculum and came up with creative ways to present problems and situations to write about. Lisa, a freckled faced girl with long, brown hair and plenty of energy, suggested

that I allow the students to create a model apartment out of shoeboxes. Through the use of an interactive response journal, which some students volunteered to use with me, she helped to give me an idea that I would've never even considered.

Here is how it transpired:

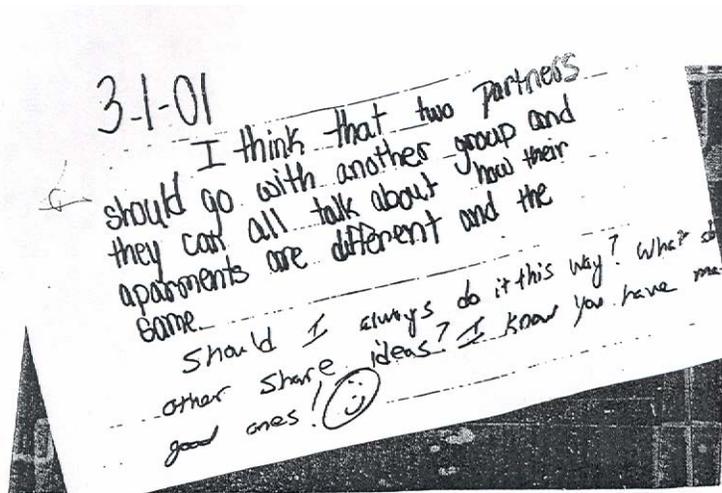


This idea indicated to me early on that students were willing to buy into what I had planned as long as they could help to guide the instruction and make it interesting from their point of view. I welcomed the idea of negotiation as long as it benefited the good of the class.

Mitch, another student in the class helped to mold the project by suggesting that students from one group be allowed to converse and share their ideas and writings with students from other groups because they did not know what other people were doing. "I think we should improve and take this to a

whole new level and be able to meet all together and share how it's going. So some of us can understand how to do it," Mitch wrote.

I was able to gather two things from Mitch's feedback: 1- Students are curious enough to want to know what other students are doing, and 2-There's a possibility that I've overlooked a student or two who may be clueless or is not participating in this activity as I had hoped.



As a result of this suggestion, I set aside one day a week where the students would participate in a share circle. We'd set eight multi-colored beanbag and eight more multi-colored blow up chairs in a circle. We also had one big, purple blow up chair, which the share person was allowed to sit on. Students who were not seated in the beanbag or blow up chairs were sprawled comfortably across my carpeted floor. Students had the opportunity to share one of their writings if they chose to, and others would listen and offer positive feedback, along with suggestions and constructive criticism. Before we began, I explained that, "Mitch and others have suggested to me that we take time to get to know what everyone else is doing. I want to give all of you the opportunity to share any

piece of work you are doing if you'd like to. (Students could choose what they wanted to read) In order to do this, we are going to need to lay down a few rules for our share circle. Please keep in mind; your feedback and questions are needed to make this circle a success. Each of you can help each other and gather some ideas in the process."

"One person speaks at a time!" one student blurts out.

"You can pass if you want to." offers another.

"Respect each other and listen, don't read your books while someone else is reading," Chimes another.

Carla volunteered to read first. She read quickly.

"Slow down!" Brittany interjected.

"What kind of pet do you have?" Brenda asked Carla when she finished.

"I have a black and white cat," She replied with a smile.

Later, Kyle, read about his apartment. He used great detail in describing what it looked like inside and out. When he finished, he answered several questions.

The answer that caught my attention was when he said, "I had to settle for a queen sized bed because I could not find a king sized bed in the paper that I could afford." Wow!!! It seemed that some learning was taking place, and I was becoming optimistic about future share circles.

In an effort to avoid seeing things through rose-colored glasses, I prompted those students who shared response journals with me to tell me how they felt about the sharing with others. I was happy to see that the students felt the same way I did. They told me that they enjoyed seeing what other people did

in their work and it helped them to think more about their work. They also told me it was fun and that they would like to do it again.

I also designed the project in the pilot study to set up conflicts, which the students had to work out amongst themselves, utilizing critical thinking skills. For example, buying furniture and having enough money to rent an apartment led to conflicts amongst students when it was time to decide who was going to sleep where, or what kind of things were a need and a want. I was fortunate enough to observe one group when they were looking to furnish their apartments using the classified ads and \$800.00 dollars that I had “given” them.

**Steve:** There’s three of us so we got mad money.

**Randi:** Yeah, let’s go on the net and buy a Jacuzzi.

**Belles:** Wait, though. We need a place to sit and for other people to sit. And what about a bed to sleep on?

**Steve:** We can use our paychecks from next week to get that stuff.

**Belles:** Pssh, I’m not sleeping on the floor for a week, and besides, my girl will leave me if I don’t have a bed for her to sleep on.

**Randi:** Illlll, you have a girl?

**Steve:** Not me, they cause too many problems.

**Belles:** And besides, we don’t make enough money to buy a Jacuzzi...you’re a hairstylist. I’m a fast food technician, and he’s a security guard.

**Randi:** Maybe he can guard at the Jacuzzi store. Then we can sneak a Jacuzzi out.

**Belles:** No cause what if we get caught? They don’t have Jacuzzis in jail.

**Randi:** Hey, I have an idea! My grandmother is rich and she always gives me money. I could get her to give me fifty dollars a day for the Jacuzzi and then we can get it.

**Steve:** Yeah!

**Belles:** When can you get it because I want it before we have the party so Mr. Annoni comes to our house...

It was exciting to see the students work through their problem together and come to a resolution that satisfied the group. It encouraged me to think about setting up other scenarios that would allow students to learn how to problem solve together.

In comparing the writing that the students did in the beginning of the year with the writing the students did throughout this project, there was a definite difference. Students wrote increasingly more and relied on me less and less when it came to making sure they were doing things correctly. They began to support each other and the work that was being produced and their attitudes and enthusiasm towards writing improved. I was no longer hunted by the sounds of “AAW!” or “How many lines does it have to be?”

### **METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION**

In order to systematically conduct my new study, the following methods of data collection were used based on what I learned in my pilot study.

- Field Log

According to Arhar(2001) a field log is a way for researchers to keep a running record of transactions during the study. Field logs are an excellent way for a teacher- researcher to record important aspects of what they are observing

without having to capture every single detail. Re-reading these notes brings back the events they have observed so that potentially important information is preserved. According to Patterson (1990), field logs have a dual purpose: “To give observation data a tangible form so that it can be analyzed, and to help the researcher recall the entire scene that was observed and not just the specifics that were written down.”(p.12)

My field log contained ongoing observations, conference notes, anecdotal records, issues that arose during the research, analytic memos, notes to myself, surveys, copies of student work and narratives. “Periodically examining what’s been written-field notes, summaries, drafts-to ask: “What else is going on?” to look for alternate interpretations, and to consider other data sources is an invaluable way to look at data and methods from alternate perspectives. Keeping a log as a record of that process allows for discovery and learning as we “peer debrief” with ourselves, taking on stances and viewpoints that are different from those we held earlier so we can see and examine other perspectives” (Patterson 1990 p.20).

As I wrote daily entries in my log, I was able to find new connections and consider them as I began to form conclusions about my work. It also allowed me to reflect on what was going on in my study, re- read student work, and make any adjustments I felt necessary.

- Observation

Arhar (2001) explains that “Observing is foundational to all good research. Knowing what to look for, how to apprehend it, and how to describe it for later reflection is a key element of the evolving repertoire of scholars.” (p.137)

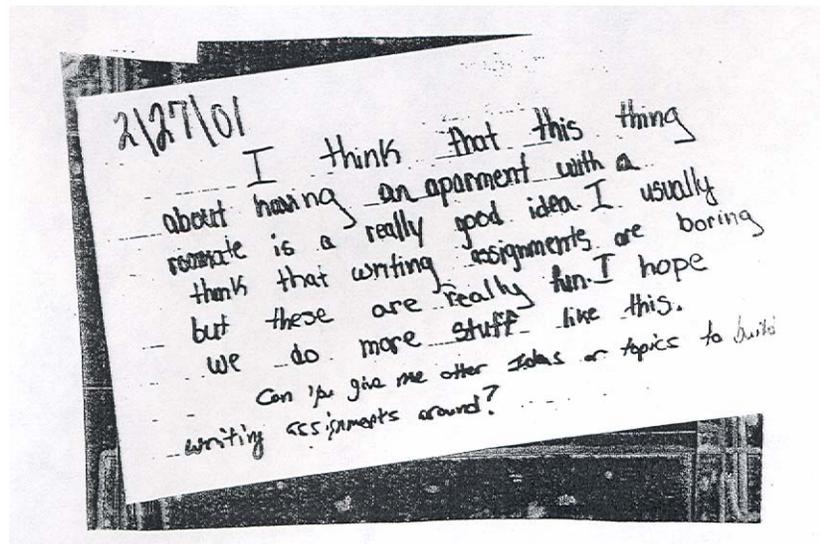
According to Wolcott(2001) participant observation is the core research activity in qualitative research. Participant observation is a broad label we assign to the wide array of techniques we use to collect data. With participant observation, the teacher is visibly involved in the activities and happenings of the classroom. Non-participant observation according to Wolcott (2001) can best be defined as unobtrusive research. The Researcher is behind a glass watching their subjects for example. Almost daily, I walked around with my pen and pad. I got involved with groups and students were aware that I was present. I tried my best to capture the conversations and actions of the students whether positive or negative for later analysis.

- Student Work

Student work such as rough drafts and final copies were used to collect data. Throughout the project, I used these drafts to assess the students' progress and check for understanding of the task at hand. I checked to see if students were able to make connections and apply them to their writing. I also used their drafts to see how much focus was being placed on correctness. "When students, even young ones, have the opportunity to jot down their understandings of course content, teachers have an effective means of gauging what learning is taking place. The journal catches more than just right answers; it also provides room for the underlying processes. With such knowledge of how the students' learning is progressing, the teacher can adjust and react accordingly" (Mayher 1983). (p.25)

One type of student work I examined was the journal. I used the journals as a means of communication as well as a tool to help guide the direction in which the scenarios took place. The students and I shared thoughts and ideas about the

project and writing. We also discussed likes and dislikes about the project. From there, I tried to address any issues that the students may have had and always assured them that their comments were welcome. Through the interactive journaling (see example below), I had the opportunity to show that I cared about the concerns of the students and helped to show them purpose and meaning of the work they were doing. If it weren't for interactive journaling, the shoebox apartment models, for example, may not have come about.



- Interviews

Interviews were used as a way to understand the perspectives of the students throughout the study. They are a way to understand what the student is thinking or doing. Formal interviews are those that have set, standard questions and informal interviews normally pose a question, then use the answer to follow up with another one. Seidman's (1998) *Technique Isn't Everything, But it is a lot*, served as a guide to conduct informal, impromptu interviews with students. Throughout the interview, I did my best to heed Seidman's (1998) suggestions to

“listen actively and move the interview forward as much as possible by building on what the participant has begun to share.” (p.66)

- Questionnaires/Surveys

A pictorial rating scale (See Appendix A) and writing questionnaire (See Appendix B) were used to rate observations and provide feedback by the students about their feelings and work they had done during the study.

Arhar(2001) suggests using these methods when it is not possible to interview everyone. Students were given a pre and post survey to determine attitudes towards writing. They were given the writing questionnaire towards the end of the study as a way to allow for extra feedback.

### **TRUSTWORTHINESS**

My pilot study helped me to try out methods of data collection for my thesis that I would use again. I felt that the data I collected for this document is trustworthy for several reasons.

- Multiple Perspectives

Various people in my support group, the theories and findings of such experts as Arhar (2001), Dewey (1938), Vygotsky (1978), and Mahyer (1983), and different methods such as an observation log allowed me to utilize a variety of ways to mold my data into evidence related to my question.

- Triangulation

According to Wolcott(2001), triangulation is the practice of checking

multiple sources. I selected a colleague to observe my classroom and offer feedback (See p.65). I also used observations and student drafts to search for different perspectives in the data.

- Reflection and Reflective Memos

The opportunity for an educator to sit back and ask himself, What am I doing in my teaching practices and why may not happen as often as it should because we find ourselves too busy to reflect adequately. Reflection enables us to look at and understand ourselves and our practices. In my research, I have found that reflection played a crucial role by helping me keep my curriculum, while also giving me an opportunity to analyze how work fit into the philosophies of such scholars as Dewey (1938), Freire (1993), Hooks (1994), and Vygotsky (1978) by way of reflective analytic memos. There are many tools in the field log that can be used in the reflective process.

- Participant Checking

Participant checking means “taking data or interpretations back to the people most affected by it to ascertain their perspectives on what you have found” (Arhar 2001). Student oral feedback by way of participant check in, and informal casual conversation, along with weekly share circles and response journals allowed me to do participant checks. Through this I was able to make sure I was recording observations correctly, students were feeling at ease over the project, and progress was being made towards my goals.

- Descriptive Writing

Narratives, whether written or spoken, comprise explanatory commentary of this research report. In teacher research, narrative reports help the reader to explore the narrative data in personal and highly descriptive ways.

- Consent

I was required to provide a consent form (See Appendix C) for students and parents to voluntarily sign which explained the purpose, duration, procedures to reduce risk, and expected benefits for the students. A similar form was also presented to my building principal to sign (See Appendix D). Another part of the consent process was submitting a formal proposal to the college's Human Subjects Internal Review Board. After their thorough examination of my proposal, I was granted permission to begin my study.

## THE NEW JOURNEY

### How does the use of real life scenarios affect the writing of fourth

grade students? I chose this as my line of inquiry for several reasons. First, I teach five language arts classes a day, which provides the opportunity for me to focus on writing with my students. Second, I have explored and am interested in trying to find a way to increase the amount of meaningful writing that students do, while also improving their fluency, clarity, correctness, (Mahyer 1983) and creativity. Third, I wanted to experience the joys of writing and help students to realize that it is not a punishment. Finally, I wanted to do something that would make my classroom enjoyable for my students and me.

When I began to figure out exactly how I wanted to “pitch” this project to my students, several different ideas came to mind. I thought about creating a slide show. I even thought about inviting one of my former students who had participated in the pilot study to talk about her experience with my new class. Then it came to me. I remembered how curious my students had been about *MY* model apartment when they entered the classroom in the beginning of the year. So I decided to set up a display, which included my apartment model, samples of students’ work from the pilot study, and photographs of the students working together and sharing their work.

As the students entered the room, I sat at my desk and allowed them to walk around and take a look at the display. After the first ten minutes of class had passed and I had seen that there was a lot of interest and a “buzz,” I asked the

students if they had any questions about what they were looking at. With that, numerous hands flew enthusiastically into the air.

“Are we going to do that?” Tamara asked.

“How long will this last?” Mandy inquired.

“Are we going to make those houses?” Mitchell yelled.

Everyone in the class seemed extremely enthusiastic, curious, and excited about what was to come.

Once I had finished with the answers to their questions, I began to give the students a formal overview of what was going to take place and why. “We’re going to be working on this unique and exciting project from now until mid-December,” I told the group in a hyper tone. “It is very important to this project and to me that all of you are open and honest with everything you do. I need honesty in your responses to my questions in your journals and in your writing. The only way I can help you and become a better teacher for those who follow is for you to let me know what you want and what you like. I also want you to know that I am not going to hold anything against you. You won’t hurt my feelings if you tell me you hate parts of this project. I need good, honest feedback.

Once I finished my honesty speech, I turned my attention towards the responsibilities and activities that would be involved in the project and explained that they would be working with partners. “This project will entail a lot of partner work, writing and creativity. You will be asked to write about your fantasy apartment. You and your partner will get jobs and learn to budget money, and

you'll even learn how to use the classified ads in the newspaper. I need you all to use your imaginations and pretend that you are 10 years older than you are now."

At this point, many of the students began to whisper to each other.

"I'm 19," shouted one.

"Oh! I'm twenty...that's cool," said another.

I also let them know that they weren't going to have jobs that pay lots of money such as a brain surgeon.

"Why not!" exclaimed Mikell, a usually quiet boy.

"Because we are only 19 years old and we didn't even finish college yet.

Duh!" answered Dylan, one of the bigger boys in the class who "knows everything."

"Oh, that's right," Mikell replied.

I confirmed Dylan's explanation, letting the students know that I really wanted them to get to know what it is like to have a minimum wage job, to have to take care of expenses and budget things. I also explained that we'd need to use writing in different ways to help us figure out how we'd plan to spend our money.

As class came to an end, I encouraged the students to think of any questions they may have for the next class, and I also asked them to think of a classmate who they would want to "live" with for the rest of the project. The next day, I started off the class by asking if the students had any questions about what we'd be completing. The one question that seemed to concern everyone was, "Are all of the classes doing this?" I assured them that all of them were, but I was only using this class for the write-up of my study.

"Why?" Dana asked.

I let the group know it was due to the fact that they were the only forty minute class I had consistently each day. Other classes were interrupted with chorus, band and other activities. I wanted to focus on my most consistent class so that I could regularly record data without worrying too much about scheduling conflicts and absences.

The group I chose to study initially consisted of 19 fourth grade students, including thirteen boys, and six girls. Although I lost five students due to relocation, I gained four more and managed to conclude the study with fourteen boys and four girls. I would describe the students in my classroom as primarily inner-city kids who come from middle to lower income families. My class is culturally diverse as well, with a total of seven Hispanic, three African – American, ten Caucasian, and three Arabic students participating. From the first day of class, I noticed these students seemed especially “social” and got along well with each other. Many of these students participate in a variety of extra-curricular activities both in and out of school, a fact which seemed to lend itself to the closeness of this group. Students worked well together on small tasks I set up during the early part of the school year, so I was comfortable in allowing them to choose whom they would work with as long as they understood that they were going to be working with this person for the entire project. I stressed that this was their decision to make, and that they needed to keep this in mind if, and when future conflicts would arise.

I handed out research participant consent forms (See Appendix C) and explained that students who wanted to participate in the research study would need to get them signed by their parents. I also read the form word by word to the

students and discussed each section in detail. I told the students that even if their parents would not sign the consent form, they would still be participating in all of the class activities. The consent form would only give me permission to use their work, or what I saw them do when I gather data and write up my study. The students understood this distinction rather well.

“So you mean my mom don’t have to sign this, but I still have to do the work and the partner thing, but you can’t write about me in your homework?” Benny asked. “That’s dumb; my mom will just sign it.”

After I read and explained the letter, I let the students know that the principal was aware of the study and had to sign a consent letter for me as well. I wanted to reassure them and let them know that this wasn’t just some crazy idea, and that the principal knew what was going on and was also looking out for their best interest.

From there, I took the opportunity to share the ups and downs of my proposal and how I spent the whole summer on it. “How many of you went swimming and hung out with friends all summer? How many of you relaxed all summer and didn’t even think of school?” All of the students raised their hands. “Well my summer was one of the busiest ever! Did you ever give up a nice day to work hard on something, and when it’s finished, someone tells you it’s not right or it’s all-wrong? That’s what my summer was like with all of the work I had to do to get ready for this. I was so mad at times I wanted to quit this thing but I stuck with it because I don’t like to give up.”

The students actually smiled and seemed to take some sort of twisted delight in this. Perhaps it was because I allowed them to see that I was just like

them, their shoes. I wanted them to know that I still go to school and I don't necessarily like every minute I spend on schoolwork either, but it's something I must do in order to get ahead financially, or get more out of life.

Later I passed out a survey with a pictorial rating scale (See Appendix A) that I created as a result of Arhar's (2001) suggestion that teachers use this type of device to elicit student feedback. In this case, I asked five questions about the students' feelings towards writing. Again, I encouraged the students to be honest with their answers. "You're not hurting my feelings by telling me you hate writing, or you don't like sharing your writing. I am doing this to find out how I can better help you."

After all of the formalities and introductions were finished, we got down to business. I wanted students to tackle the descriptive writing that was required by our language arts curriculum. Now, I could have easily referred to our language resource book that illustrated descriptive writing beautifully. It even included an overhead and sample worksheets to guide the students. But I thought of all of the drill and practice these students had been exposed to from grade one, and I wanted to avoid that. Doing so certainly would have defeated my long summer days of hard work and short changed my students. I wanted them to have something they would want to describe.

I began by asking the students the difference between reality and fantasy.

**Misty:** Reality is real and fantasy is not.

**Mr. Annoni:** Give us an example.

**Misty:** This school is real. Harry Potter's is not. It's fantasy.

**Peter:** The *Lord of the Rings* is fantasy too!

This led to a small debate among some students about which movie was better, and while I enjoyed their comparison and contrast, I reminded them of Misty's definition and we moved on. I asked the students to imagine they lived in a metropolis, like Manhattan, where there aren't many single family houses, but rather high rise apartments that cost thousands of dollars a month to rent and even more to own. At this point, the students' faces seemed to be shocked and amazed at the cost of living. I told them to imagine that they lived in one of those apartments. Suddenly, five hands went into the air, each wondering how he or she could afford such a place to live. I told them that they each had 20 million dollars to buy the apartment and to "hook it up any way they chose." I'm not quite sure if the class heard anything after 20 million dollars because I heard a chorus of

"WOW!"

"I'm rich!"

I continued "You have 20 million dollars to hook up your apartment any way you want to because this is your fantasy apartment. Think about things you would want in it." I told students that they could have anything because it was their fantasy. I gave them an example of something I would want in my fantasy apartment. I read, "In my recreation room, I have a full size batting cage with a painting of Yankees Stadium around it so that I feel like I am batting in the stadium."

Another chorus echoed through the room

"Oooh"

“Aaah, that’s neat.”

I scanned the class to see if there was anyone who seemed disinterested, but everyone looked back at me enthusiastically.

After I set up the scenario, I told the students that they needed to brainstorm some of the items they wanted in their fantasy apartments. “Think about what the apartment will look like once it was all finished. Describe your apartment inside and out. Pretend you are writing me a letter to explain where and how you are living.” I asked students to imagine that they were writing me to say, “Hey, I’ve made it big in the world! Check out what I have.” Take me on a room by room tour of your apartments through writing and paint a visual work of art in my head.” Then I gave the students an example of what I was talking about. I asked each one to close their eyes and try to visualize my apartment as I read my own fantasy description to them:

“When you walk into my 200 square foot relaxation room, you will find yourself stepping onto a soft, gushy, white rug which causes your feet to sink two inches deep. As you look from left to right, you see the beautiful, aqua-blue ocean and the waves crashing against the smooth and sandy coastline through a long, large window along the far wall of the room. There is black leather furniture that is as soft as the biggest, feathery pillow you’ve ever laid on, and the furniture is set up in the center of the room. There is a movie screen sized television along the left wall, and a five hundred gallon fish tank built into the right wall with loads of tropical fish. Along the ceiling you will find black surround sound speakers with smooth jazz piano music playing.”

It was exciting for me to see the expressions on some of the faces of the students as they had their eyes closed and pictured this. When I asked the students to open their eyes, I asked how many of the students had a picture in their head of what my room looked like. All of their hands went up. I asked some to volunteer what they saw best and why.

**Jill:** The rug.

**Mr. Annoni:** Why?

**Jill:** Because you told us it was soft and gushy, and that we'd sink two inches into it. I'd like that feeling on my feet.

**Benny:** The fish tank because I could see all of the colorful fish.

**Iris:** The ocean out of the window because it's so blue like the Bahamas when we went.

Finally I called on Dylan who said, "The big screen, because I'd be over there playing all of my games on that big thing. That would be cool." I asked the students why they were able to visualize this so well.

Walker raised his hand and said, "You used describing words."

I asked the class what we call describing words in writing. Mandy raised her hand and said "Adjectives."

I explained that adjectives are words that are used to describe things and that they help us to paint that visual picture in our heads. I also gave them an example of what my relaxation room would be like without using any description. When I was finished, Thomas called out, "The room seemed boring when you told it like that." From there, I turned the class loose to begin drafting a description of their fantasy apartments.

As I walked around, I saw that all of the students were either writing or thinking about what else to write. In no time at all, many had at least three paragraphs and were still working. When I walked past Joseph, however, who had very little on his paper, I asked him why he wasn't writing, and he told me he was thinking. I accepted his answer but made a mental note to keep an eye on his progress.

The next day I reminded the class of the benefits of using words to paint pictures by re-reading a small snippet from my work. As I circulated throughout the room, I noticed that everyone was actively involved in additional brainstorming, writing, and even sharing their work although I had planned on doing that later. I allowed students to share for a few minutes, but reminded them that they would need to use this feedback to complete their rough draft. It felt good to hear and see students like Steven and Thomas who could often be uninterested in language arts let out an enthusiastic "YESSSS." I checked up on Joseph, who had much more on his paper than he did the last time I had checked, which pleased me. Joseph often appeared disengaged from school, so I wanted to continue to monitor him closely.

"Time's up. We only have a minute left in class. I need you to put your pencils down." I said. There were a lot of "ooos" and "awwws." Mandy blared out

"I can't stop writing."

"Well, why not?" I asked, and in unison Dana and Nick called out, "Because this is fun!" Frankie came over to my desk on the way out and said "Mr. Annoni, I like writing this...my hand hurts, but I like this writing."

At that moment, I felt a sense of accomplishment and pride but knew that much more work lay ahead of us all.

Once the students were a few days into the writing project with their fantasy apartments, I decided to get out my pen and pad, and tried my best to capture the words of the students, as they were actively involved in their writing. In this case, I wanted to see how well the students were working together when it came to proofreading and partner-checking. I wanted the students to help each other, point out errors, offer suggestions from another point of view, and to be a “safe” audience for one another. Essex (1996) notes that “having students read each other’s work and commenting upon it can help both reader and writer. Writers are provided an audience for their work, and, for many children, comments by their peers will be attended to in ways that teacher comments would not” (p.2).

Keeping this in mind, I casually sat down near a group of students to listen in on their peer editing process. Benny and Eduardo were the first to capture my attention because Eduardo was touching and each of Benny’s words as he read them out loud.

**Eduardo:** Check out my Jacuzzi. Switch seats now so I can check yours.

**Benny:** We can put these books on the floor for more room.

**Eduardo:** You need a period here. What’s this here? That’s supposed to be a lowercase.

**Benny:** No, it’s supposed to be Capital I. It’s I’m.

**Eduardo:** It's a period here. You're starting a new sentence again.

Listen, I'm reading this out loud. Listen how I read and put pauses.

Those are periods.

Eduardo is clearly working hard to proofread his partner's work and to help Benny understand *why* certain things need to be changed. This is the type of teamwork I had hoped the project would engender. I noticed Eduardo look to me as if to say, "Look at me. I'm doing what you do, Mr. Annoni!" or perhaps I am reading too much into this and he's just looking to me for a nod of approval. Either way, Benny and Eduardo care about what they're writing to make sure that things make sense and are correct.

I noticed Joseph working at his desk by himself, so I decided to go over to find out why, and to see if there was anything I can do to help.

**Mr. Annoni:** How's everything going?

**Joseph:** Okay.

**Mr. Annoni:** Do you have any questions?

**Joseph:** No.

**Mr. Annoni:** What do you think of this stuff so far?

**Joseph:** It's pretty good. I like all types of projects like this.

**Mr. Annoni:** I noticed you're working by yourself; do you want to go to another team?

**Joseph:** No.

**Mr. Annoni:** Who are you going to work with?

**Joseph:** I think Mikey.

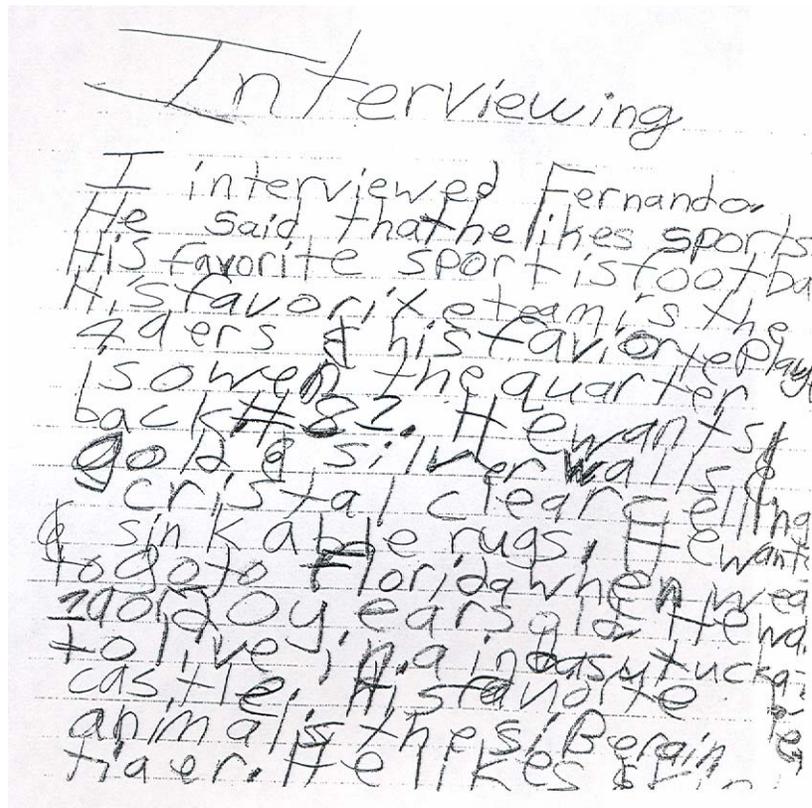
**Mr. Annoni:** Have you talked about teaming up?

**Joseph:** We spoke like three times but we're still not sure.

**Mr. Annoni:** Do you prefer to work alone or with others?

**Joseph:** Either.

At this point I let Joseph know that if he had any questions, to let me know. Joseph is from a disruptive home life and I can see his ability to do well, but I know he has the potential to fall apart. He often calls out in class with inappropriate comments and without regard for consequences. His writing often appears rushed and his letters are outside of the provided lines. I want to try to have him focus on taking his time, writing slower and emphasize writing within the provided lines. In doing this, I hope to see an improvement in legibility and hope he notices the difference in the appearance of his final work. I have included a sample of Joseph's early work below. It is a final copy of his roommate interview that the students had to do as part of creating a character sketch.



As I looked around, I saw lots of students getting up to get dictionaries. There were several groups collaborating, sharing, and proofreading their work. As the class drew to a close, I took a poll to see how many students were finished with their writing. All of them were still proofreading and editing. Since it was Friday, I let the students know that their final copies would be due in their composition books by Wednesday. This gave them the weekend plus two more days in school to proofread, partner-check, edit and revise before turning in their finished product. I reminded them to think back to the earlier lessons at the start of the school year when we spent a week on capitalization and punctuation. I also encouraged them to utilize their notes and handouts which contained rules and examples for them to follow.

On Monday, I wanted to monitor students in action. I started out by working with Joseph one on one to help get him organized and to show him where his “sloppy copy,” as the students were comfortable calling it, was to be written. He had written it in his final composition book and I wanted to make him aware that only finished, final, published work was to be put in there. Once this was established, and he demonstrated a clear understanding of what went where, I left him alone to complete his “sloppy copy.” As I walked around the room, I found myself drawn to a conversation between Jill and Tamara who were partner-checking each other’s work one last time before putting their final product into their composition books.

**Jill:** What are we looking for? The word couches?

**Mr. Annoni:** What are you girls doing?

**Jill:** We have our quick word spelling books looking for couches because we don’t know if it’s spelled right.

**Tamara:** I’m a bad speller. Is this correct Mr. Annoni?

**Mr. Annoni:** C-o-u-c-h-e-s. Yes it is.

**Jill:** Thanks

**Tamara:** How do we spell it?

**Jill:** C-o-u-c-h-e-s. Write it down.

**Tamara:** You write it down too in case I’m not here. Leather, how do you spell leather, let’s look.

**Jill:** La-et-her, look there, le sounds like let-her.

**Tamara:** How? Wait let me see it. That’s not how you spell it.

Clearly, these girls want to follow standard spelling conventions. I'm not so sure this would be the case, however, if they were working individually. Most of the time I have found that when students are left to proofread their work on their own, they fail to capture their own errors. Some even waste time by rushing through their work without seeming to care about spelling and grammar errors. Come to think of it, we adults do the same thing on occasion.

The benefits and importance of peer conferencing during proofreading and editing became clear in my classroom. As Herrmann (1989) noted, "Collaboration provides writers with an opportunity to read their drafts aloud and to discuss them face to face with a peer audience while the written product is taking place." (p.1)

As I was thinking about the benefits of collaboration, I noticed that Steven had his hand up. He asked, "Can you put on music for us to write to again?"

In the beginning of the year, during our first writing assignment I asked the students if music might help them to focus on their writing. They unanimously liked the idea, so I honored the student's request and played classical music for the students to work to. I like to play classical or jazz since this seems to allow them to relax and write freely. I also think that some of the music may actually help to stimulate thoughts to help paint visual pictures that go along with their work. The students conferenced, wrote and worked until the end of class.

All of the students worked very hard on finishing their fantasy apartment pieces. As I began to look over their work, I was pleased with the amount some had written, their use of adjectives, and the support they were providing to each other. Mitchell's finished work (below) allowed me to see how focused students

were on using descriptive words, but it also allowed me to see that in the future, I would need to dedicate some review time to punctuation and capitalization.

My Fantasy Apartment

The outside of my apartment will have three football statues made out of gold. Two doors in the middle of the three statues. <sup>there are green bushes on the side of</sup> On the side of my apartment is green bushes. <sup>incomplete thought</sup> Ten on each side with landscaping. In the back is a Lamborgenni deoblo, a limo, with a little house to park my cars.

When you first walk in, you see leather furniture, a big screen TV, with a PS2, Gamecube and an X-box. A butler to get what ever I want (Red carpet that is the softest you've ever walked on). In the room to your left is a small pool. Then straight <sup>see</sup> a kitchen with marble flooring, two stoves, and one refridgerater, and a marble sink. To your right is my elevator. The upstrias has my bedroom to your right with a king size bed with a 40 in screen TV with a VCR and a Dvd player. <sup>there is</sup> a 20 gallon fish tank with tropical fish. The middle room is a bathroom, gold flooring, a marble bathtub and a gold shower <sup>with</sup> a gold and silver sink. The room to the left has a bowling lane, a pooltable

Once we finished our descriptive drafting about a fantasy apartment, I shifted gears to get the students to gather information from other sources. I presented a mini lesson, “our forum for making a suggestion to the whole class-raising a concern, exploring an issue, modeling a technique, reinforcing a strategy in a brief lecture” (Calkins 1994), on interviewing that would lead into the selection of a partner to work with. I asked the students what it meant to interview someone.

“It means to ask someone a bunch of questions about something”

answered Jill.

“Why do we ask someone a whole bunch of questions?” I fired back.

Walker added, “It’s to gather information about them.”

I explained that we would begin to learn about the person who would become our “roommate,” but before we did that, I wanted to discuss some of the things that would be important to find out about someone and why. I asked the students what things they thought would be important to learn about someone they were going to live with. We created the following list on the board:

- what they like to do for fun
- knowledge about things
- dependable/ responsible
- favorite things
- skills, job, and personal qualities

After compiling this list, I encouraged the students to think about other things they would like to add.

Then I discussed the importance of asking who, what, where, how, when, and why when it comes to the interview questions. I gave an example for the students to see and think about in regards to the importance of asking these questions. I asked Mitchell to be my roommate and to pretend I was interviewing him. He agreed. I asked him what he likes to do on the weekend: He replied, “I like to have fun.” I asked the class if I had gotten enough information out of Mitchell. Many of the students called out a no, and I asked why not: Misty commented “Because you do not know WHAT kind of fun, or WHERE he has fun or WHEN, like what times.... day or night?” Then I asked Mitchell the

questions again. This time, I asked him, “WHEN do you like to have fun? Day or Night?”

“All day and all night.”

“WHAT type of fun do you like to have?”

“Parties!”

I asked the class why these follow-up questions are important if we’re going to live together. Mikell said, “If you like to sleep and he likes to party all weekend, then you guys are going to fight.”

“Very good! This is the type of follow up I want all of you to do when you’re interviewing each other. In the meantime, you will have the next 15 minutes to come up with other interview questions for tomorrow. Remember, you are ten years older so don’t ask questions about fourth grade things. I walked around and observed several students creating lists with questions such as “Where do you work? How much do you make? Is this your first time living with a roommate?”

The next day I observed Dana, Mandy and Misty interviewing each other. Dana began the interview process first.

**Dana:** Mandy, what’s your favorite hangout?

**Mandy:** Don’t have one.

**Dana:** What do you like to do for fun?

**Mandy:** I don’t know.

**Dana:** Think of three.

**Mandy:** Dance silly, listen to music and sing.

**Dana:** Now misty, what’s your favorite hobby?

**Misty:** Drawing.

**Dana:** What do you like to draw? What do you like to do to have fun?

**Misty:** I play with my cat.

**Dana:** Anything else?

**Misty:** No, not really.

**Dana:** What's your favorite thing?

**Misty:** My kitty cat.

**Dana:** Why?

**Mandy (calling out):** Is this right? (Misty and Dana ignore her and continue with the interview.)

**Dana:** What type of job would you like?

**Misty:** Fashion designer.

**Dana:** Why?

I enjoyed listening to these girls interview each other. They asked follow-up questions and pushed each other to give other answers instead of settling for, "I don't know." They also did a nice job of staying focused and avoided being disrupted by Mandy's interruption.

Next, I noticed Walker and Dylan talking about anesthesiology, so I listened in on them.

**Dylan:** Are you going to college?

**Walker:** When I'm 30 years old.

**Dylan:** You don't have a car.

**Walker:** Yes I do.

**Dylan:** You didn't say that.

**Walker:** Yes I did.

**Dylan:** What do you have?

**Dylan:** You are not asking me any good questions! Ask me what kind of job I have!

**Walker:** I did. (Laughing)

**Dylan:** Let me see it! Let me see your work! Ask me what I do in my job.

With that, I interrupted, gave Walker a firm look, and told Dylan, “He should be thinking about his own things to ask you.” I felt at that moment that their work was becoming unproductive as they became slightly hostile in their exchange. Often they tend to work faster than the other children, but when they finish, or think they are finished, they tend to waste time and fool around just enough to receive negative attention from the teacher. Herrmann (1989) notes that there are positive and negative consequences with peer conferencing. She states “student writers were challenged by their peers to clarify, to provide more detail as the peer reactors asked questions when they were confused, and suggested ways to improve writing. Yet, there were incidents of unproductive even hostile verbal exchange, and in some groups students hurried through the group work in a robot like monotone” (p.2). I found that in the first group I observed, Dana did a nice job of asking follow-up questions for clarification and detail, while the second group was unproductive in a way that was similar to what Herrmann (1989) described. I planned to utilize more proximity control with this group and others whom I perceived to be off-task.

Not forgetting about his early struggle with the project, I strolled over to the desk where Joseph was working with Frankie. I asked him what had happened with his plans to work with Mikey, and he told me that Mikey already had a partner and that Frankie was one of the only people left. While I enjoy giving my students the freedom to choose whom they'd be working with, I began to wonder if I shouldn't have assigned partners. That way I could've avoided having situations where people might be "stuck" working with someone. On the other hand, I felt that if they would room with someone in real life, it would be a decision they would freely make, and I wanted this aspect of the project to be as lifelike as possible.

Joseph seemed to be both nervous and energetic, different from his usual somber demeanor. He was rocking back and fourth on the floor and looking over at me. I noticed him continuing to check in with me visually as if to say, "See me working, Mr. Annoni?" I responded to his look with a nod and a reassuring smile. He seemed satisfied to know I was giving him attention as he began to focus more on questioning with his partner and less on me.

I challenged the students to use their imaginations and pretend that they were writing a story about their partner's life for millions of people to read. I asked them to consider themselves the best authors in the world. I told them that they were the only ones capable of writing the story of their partner's life. These prompts were met with renewed excitement as students prepared to transform their interview notes into paragraphs.

As I walked around, I made it a point to see Joseph. I noticed his paper had real big writing on it as if a first grade student had written it. His letters took

up three lines on the paper. “ Joseph,” I said in a pleasant tone, “Please try to keep your words and letters in between the single spaces. I don’t want you to run out of room on your paper. You’ll have to get three or four pieces of paper for each of your partner’s answers.” He laughed as I said this, and I asked him if there was any particular reason why he was writing so big. He said, “No, I just felt like it.” I tried to talk to him in a way that wouldn’t embarrass him or turn him off to writing. I can remember several occasions in elementary school when teachers would criticize me and tell me my writing was sloppy and needed improvement, or that I needed to write neater. I was angered, embarrassed, and hurt because I felt that I was doing the best I could. Those comments still remain deeply embedded within me and even today my feelings towards writing are less than desirable.

As I made my way around the room a few days later, I couldn’t help but notice Iris and Peter. Iris yelled at Peter, telling him that he was not cooperating with her plan of proofreading. It seems that she wanted him to read her work while she read his silently, but he wanted to read her work out loud and have them correct it together. Then, when they were finished with her work, they could read his out loud and correct it together. Peter won the debate, and I listened to him read his interview of Iris out loud. I laughed inside when he said, “Iris is a teacher that makes six-hundred dollars a day.” I thought to myself, “Wait until they get their real jobs.” It was interesting to see Iris and Peter working together. I made a note in my log to continue to watch them closely in the future. They struck me as a somewhat odd pair to be working together. Peter works to

maintain the image of the “bad boy” or “rebel”, while Iris is an independent thinker and unique individual who has no problem coming to school wearing a T-shirt and one of her father’s neckties.

Joseph seemed to be more active throughout this part of the project. I noticed him actively engaged in proofreading and conferencing with his partner. He offered many suggested spellings and corrections with punctuation to help make his partner’s work more interesting to his audience. He seemed to be progressing as well as the others in the class, but I still needed to remind him to take his time and write smaller. I knew that in the future I would want to work with Joseph a little closer on things such as format and conventions, but for now I was focusing on taking small steps with him so that he wouldn’t be turned off to writing as I was.

As the students continued to conference with their partners and proofread one another’s work, I noticed that many students had dictionaries open and were helping each other find the correct spelling of words. They were also offering suggestions for punctuation and ideas of how to re-write unclear sentences so they would make more sense. It was gratifying for me to continue to see Iris and Peter working hard, getting along, and helping each other, especially when it came to suggestions about corrections or additions to each other’s interviews. I overheard Peter say, “Wait, let’s get rid of this part, I don’t like it” as he read his piece out loud to Iris. Iris questioned why he’d want to get rid of something he’d already written, but once he said “it doesn’t make sense to me now that I’m reading it,” she agreed. They crossed off the offending words with a red correction pencil. They were the only boy-girl combination working together, and they were making

what seemed to be good editing choices. To satisfy my curiosity, I conducted a brief interview with them just outside my classroom door:

**Mr. Annoni:** How are things going?

**Iris:** Good.

**Peter:** Mmm hmm.

**Iris:** Actually great!

**Mr. Annoni:** Why?

**Iris:** I don't know.

**Peter:** We just like working together.

**Iris:** In 3<sup>rd</sup> grade we worked together.

**Peter:** Yeah a lot.

**Mr. Annoni:** You don't mind being the only boy/girl team?

**Peter:** We've been close since 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

**Mr. Annoni:** Has anyone in class teased you two about working together?

[I asked this because in my pilot study, my support group questioned my decision to have boy/ girl teams living together. I assured them that they weren't being forced to do this. I was glad to have another boy/girl pair to confirm that these decisions are made on their own.]

**Iris:** No, not at all.

**Mr. Annoni:** Who decided that you'd be working together?

**Peter:** We both did.

**Iris:** I asked Peter and he said he needed a partner and I said good.

**Mr. Annoni:** What about partner checking...how is that going?

**Peter:** I think it's great. It's my favorite part.

**Mr. Annoni:** Why?

**Iris:** I like disagreeing and then working it out. It's fun because we both have a say and are working together.

**Mr. Annoni:** Well, that's all I wanted to ask you. Thanks for your time. You are doing a nice job.

This brief interview helped me to see that these particular students were not concerned with what others might think about them working together, but rather that they were engaged enough by the project to want to share this writing experience together, just as they have with so many other fun things in the past. It also showed me that they were focused on helping each other throughout their conferencing and that they felt safe enough and took their work seriously enough to get into disagreements and debates to make their work better.

Remembering how important it was to my former students to know what was going on with their peers' work, I decided to utilize a share circle. I set it up much the same way as I had done in the past. I started the class by asking, "Misty, do you know what Thomas's apartment looks like?"

"No," she replied.

"Thomas, do you know what Iris's apartment looks like?"

"No, not really," he said.

"Iris, do you know what Walker's apartment looks like?"

"No."

I asked the class what we could do in order to clear up this situation and Mitchell suggested that classmates partner up with someone different and share them. Iris countered with the idea that students stand up and read them out loud, and Steven

suggested that they “trade them and then read our own.” I gave him a joking look of “What did you just say???” He and his classmates laughed as he realized that what he said was not what he meant. He followed up with, “You know. I mean we can trade books and read the ones we get. Like someone else said.” Eduardo made the final suggestion, adding, “We can read them on the floor in the bean bag chairs.”

I explained to the students that I’d like to try a share circle on the floor and have volunteers read descriptions of their fantasy apartments because everyone had that piece finished and did such a great job with them. Once we finished, they would give comments and feedback, just as we do in reading workshop. As the students got their composition books from me, they walked over to the beanbag chairs and began to form a circle. Once they were settled, I allowed them to re-read what they had written to themselves to prepare for sharing their work with their classmates. Iris volunteered to read first. After she read, Walker was quick to provide feedback.

**Walker:** It sounds like you’re stuffed in the apartment.

**Iris:** What do you mean?

**Benny:** It seems like nobody’s allowed in. It’s all cluttered and you cannot move in there, so no one could get in. It’s too big to be an apartment.

**Mr. Annoni:** Remember, this is what kind of apartment?

[Benny and the group said FANTASY!].

**Mr. Annoni:** Is there a limit to our imaginations and the things we can make up in a fantasy?

**Benny:** No.

**Mitchell [interrupting]:** She was jumping around a lot.

**Mr. Annoni:** Why do you say that?

**Mitchell:** She was inside in the bedroom, then in the garage, then upstairs again. [Murmurs of agreement fill the class.]

**Walker:** Yeah, she talked about the car, then the kitchen, then the limo, then upstairs, then the garage.

I was pleased to see that students were focusing on sequence along with other conventions. Misty read next. I've included a piece of her 3- page finished text here.

My Fantasy Apartment

Outside of my apartment I have a huge water fountain. On the sides I have a lot of trees. In the back I have a giant swimming pool with clear blue water and a big diving board. I also have a grill, and a hottub and lounge chairs all around the pool on a huge deck. In the living room I have a big screen surround sound tv. I also have a huge leather couch with zebra prints on it!

In the kitchen I have a silver stove, refrigerator, trash compactor, dish washer, and sink. I also have a food chopper and a smoothie machine. I also <sup>if you do not do section</sup> have a life time supply of Wendy's fries. In the dining room I have a table with pictures of cats on it, chairs, and a huge chandelier! In the downstairs bathroom I have a hottub, a purple sink and toilet. In my bedroom I have a king size bed with fur on the frame of my bed and on my bureau. I also have fur on my nightstand and on my phone. I also have a balcony with fur on the railing. In the guest room the rug has pink sparkles on it. I also have a king size bed with sparkles on the quilt. In the game room I have a pinball machine.

As she read, people reacted with laughs at her comment about having thirty-seven fish. When she finished, Peter said, "You must like fur a lot because you have it on everything." Iris asked, "Do you have a maid? Because you have a lot of rooms and pets."

Nearly every hand remained in the air as students tried to give Misty comments and feedback. I interrupted and explained that I expect students to jointly manage the share group. I directed the reader to read, pick three people to give comments and feedback, and then pick on someone else to read their work next. I explained that I'd be in the back of the room while they ran the discussion themselves. I wanted to do this to give the students the opportunity to take more

ownership in the share group. They did a nice job of working together and respecting each other throughout the activity.

Dana read next,

My Fantasy Apt.

On the outside of my house you will see many shiny crystal clear windows. If you go to the back you will see a huge rectangle pool with a big and small diving board and walls made of beautiful pink rosebushes. At one end you will see a white gate. If you open the gate you will see a park with 4 swings; three slides and a tower with monkey bars connected, a couple of benches and two picnic tables.

When you step in you will see a writing room some doorbells and mail boxes. Then when you look up there is an amazingly beautiful chandelier. If you walk down the hall you will see a pearwhitcase.

If you walk up the first door you see is mine. When you walk in there is a living room with a breathtaking grand piano and a humongous flat screen TV with a huge black stereo. It also has a playstation 2 and a dvd player. In the middle there is a coffee table. It has a comfortable black couch and in the middle arm rest there is a telephone.

If you keep walking forward there you will see my kitchen, with a beige fridge, a dishwasher on over and a sink. There is a bar with cabinets on the bottom if you go past there you

When it was time for feedback, Iris started with, "Why do you have 4 beanbag chairs for one person?"

"In case I have company." Dana answered.

Peter asked, "How tall is your rock climbing wall?"

"It's 50 feet high."

At this point, I had to stop the session because class was ending. I told students that I was pleased to hear all of the comments that they shared with one another. I

told them that I liked both the effective use of adjectives and also the way they encouraged one another not to jump around instead of being in sync and in sequence. Misty and Dana's work allowed me to see that students were capable of writing more and using their imaginations when they weren't confined by the textbook approach to writing a descriptive piece. I chose to illustrate their work because they were active participants in the share circle.

As I reflected on the lesson, I couldn't help but think that when the students had the opportunity to share something as meaningful and creative to them as their fantasy apartments, they were more than willing to volunteer their work. They were also eager to offer feedback to each other and help with mistakes. Hooks (1994) provides support for this thought, stating, "All students, not just those from marginalized groups, seem more eager to enter energetically into classroom discussion when they perceive it as pertaining directly to them. Our collective listening to one another affirms the value and uniqueness of each voice" (p.84).

Furthermore, I found this share circle to be successful because it avoided the "narration sickness" that Frerie (1970) describes, in which teachers talk and "fill" the students with the contents of their narration. This idea, more commonly known as the banking concept of education only allows the students to receive, file and store the "deposits" by those who consider themselves to be knowledgeable. With the peer conferencing and the share circle, I was attempting to work against the banking concept, electing to be emancipatory rather than oppressive in my classroom practices.

When it came time to move on to the personal narrative aspect of writing mandated by the ELA curriculum, I asked the students to create a piece based on a job they would select and why they'd want that job. I started out by reading a statement on the board that said, "Since you are only ten years older than you are today, these are the jobs that are available to you." I explained to the students that the jobs and wages were taken directly from the newspaper's Sunday edition. I asked the students to pick one job that they would like to do and think about why they'd want to do it. I did not put the wages on the board yet, so that students would not merely pick the highest paying job. Once the students made their selections, I asked them to tell me what types of things they thought they might be doing on the job, how much they thought they would make per month, and how they would plan to spend their paycheck.

After discussing what they would be writing about, I went over each job and gave a very brief explanation of what each one was. There were ten jobs to choose from including machine operator, hairstylist, and fast food technician. When I mentioned fast food technician, I noticed Steven giggling like a first grade student.

**Mr. Annoni:** What's so funny?

**Steven:** I was laughing because a fast food technician is someone who works at McDonald's.

**Mr. Annoni:** What's wrong with working at McDonald's? [No response]

What would happen if nobody worked at McDonald's?

**Dylan:** We wouldn't have McDonald's.

**Mr. Annoni:** What would happen if we didn't have waste management people (garbage men)?

**Benny:** We'd have houses full of garbage.

**Mr. Annoni:** Understand this class, without people in these jobs; no matter how undesirable they may be for some of us...they are necessary. Some people such as senior citizens may depend on a fast food type of job for survival because their retirement benefits and social security benefits may not be enough for them to live on.

**Peter:** My stepbrother works at MacDonald's.

**Mr. Annoni:** Oh yeah, how old is he?

**Peter:** He's in high school.

**Mr. Annoni:** Well, why does he work at MacDonald's?

**Peter:** He uses the money to pay for his car and buy clothes.

**Mr. Annoni:** So he works as a fast food tech., who buys clothes from the sales clerk, who sends you to the cashier, who informs the stockperson that they need to put that item back on the shelf, who informs security to watch the floor while they go into the back room. Finally, security locks up so that the cleaners can clean the store and make it nice for the next day. Do you see how much we need fast food technicians? Not only do they make our fries and burgers, but they keep others working as well.

This teachable moment provided me with an opportunity for students to think about how one thing affects another. It allowed me to share how real-life economics works in a way that wasn't too complex for my fourth grade class. Carr (1990) suggests that in every course, and especially in content subjects,

students should be taught to think logically, analyze and compare, question and evaluate. I felt that this was a grand opportunity to build on what Carr said and also provide an opportunity for the collateral learning experiences that Dewey (1938) describes in *Experience and Education*.

From here, I instructed the class to begin to draft a response. Students worked quietly, thinking about what they wanted to be and why. With three minutes left, I informed students, “We’ll proofread for errors and check your rough drafts tomorrow.” I pointed out that when we had partner checked the last assignment, I noticed Peter and Iris reading each other’s work out loud and responding to each other as they went along. I explained how they read Iris’s piece first, and corrected, then read Peter’s and corrected his. I mentioned how they took their time and focused on each sentence to make sure things sounded good and made sense.

I re-read the conversation between Peter and Iris from my observation log and asked them to tell me if anything in my account was inaccurate. I told the class that I saw Peter read his interview about Iris, and then he said he didn’t like a particular sentence there anymore. When Iris asked why, he said it didn’t make sense to him so they crossed it off. I asked them if that was how it happened and if they had anymore to add. As Ely (1997) suggests, I wanted to do a participant check to make sure I accurately captured what went on between the two students. I also wanted to use this check to model a peer feedback process that students could use the next day.

As the weeks continued to pass, there were days when classes were either shortened or we did not meet at all due to parent/teacher conferences, assemblies,

and delays. On top of that, I found myself sidelined for a week with pneumonia, and strep throat. I had lost valuable observation time, but students' enthusiasm for the project did not wane.

When I returned, I wanted the students to learn how to use the classified advertisements in the newspaper. I did this for several reasons. First, many of my students were unfamiliar with the newspaper in general. Most were unaware of how to use the classified advertisements to obtain jobs, or even purchase goods at a lower price. Since I was going to limit them to an eight hundred dollar budget when the time came to furnish their "real" apartments, they couldn't rely only on the display ad of major department stores or they'd quickly run out of money. Finally, they were going to use the classifieds to find a "real" apartment they could afford based on the budget we were going to work out in class.

I took the opportunity to incorporate math into the writing program by having students write a prediction on how much they'd be making each month and how they'd be spending it. From there, they had to calculate their earnings on a daily, weekly, monthly and yearly basis. Once they were finished with their calculations, they needed to write a narrative on how much they had really made, how they would spend it, and how they felt about the amount they were making monthly. It was interesting to see how many students initially said they wanted to buy fancy cars and have indoor pools along with cell phones and big-screen televisions. A few actually realized from the beginning that they would need to spend money on the rent and bills.

Of course I wasn't through. I took pleasure in anticipating the bomb I was about to drop on the group. It was reality check time! I had students label a

page in their composition books with the word BUDGET. “Okay class, on the first line, I want you to write down the amount of money you make a month. Next to that write the word start. Now, subtract \$250.00 for taxes.”

“Mr. Annoni, who takes the taxes and why do they need to take them?”

Benny asked.

“The government takes taxes out of each worker’s paycheck. The money they take goes towards road repairs, schools, and other services like police, fireman, and EMT’s.” I was proud of Benny’s excellent question. “After you have your answer from the first subtraction problem, I want you to write the words, “I have left” next to it. Next, I want you to think about how you are going to get to work.”

“Car!” Someone shouted.

“Bus!” exclaimed another.

“Taxi, Subway, Plane!” The class fell silent.

“Plane??” Peter said in a sarcastic tone. The whole class broke out in laughter.

“How many of you want a car to drive to work?” Everyone’s hand went up. “Okay, it’s official then, you all have car payments and insurance.”

“OOOOOH!” the students collectively cried out. “I’ll be nice, though. You can get some cars out there rather cheaply. Your car payment and insurance will be \$200.00 a month. Subtract that from whatever the number is you currently have left.”

Students began to complain more and more as I had them continue to deduct money for such things as food, utilities, cable and phone. I enjoyed every

minute of it and hoped that they were gaining a new appreciation for what their parents had to go through every month. This example illustrates exactly what the students needed to budget for:

# Budget

1,280.00 start

-300 - taxes

980, - I have left

-200 - Car and insurance

780.00 - I have left

-55 - cable

+25 - Split cable

725 - I have left

-30 - Phone

+15 - Phone

695 - I have left

-100 - food

590 - I have left

-150 - Spending

+50 - cut spending

445 - I have left

-150 - bank

295 - I have left

-100 - credit cards

195 - I have left

-35 - cell phone

+35 - cut cell

160 - I have left

I have 265  
for rent

Iris, finishing her calculations let out a sigh, adding, “ I’m broke! I only have like \$250.00 dollars left over, and divided by two only leaves me with \$125.00 dollars every two weeks for gas, spending and partying.” She failed to remember that she had not yet deducted rent from her budget. This was the moment I had been waiting for. I asked the students to write a reflective paragraph explaining how much they had predicted they were going to make, how they felt about it, and how they would spend it. Then, I wanted them to write another explaining how much they actually made, how much they had left after paying everything, and how they felt. In a final paragraph, they would need to share what they had learned about the whole activity. Jerry’s reflective paragraph (below) is a great example of the collateral learning experiences that Dewey (1938) notes in his work.

## Budget

I have \$125 to pay my rent. I feel very, very, very, very, very sad because I am probably going to be living in a shack. I have learned that my parents may not afford stuff that I want.

Having the students reflect on the budget activity allowed me to gain insight as to whether the students had a better understanding of what it is like to be a working adult. In our share circle, many of them expressed how they were able to relate to their parents in new ways now that they had done this exercise.

“Now I know why my mom always tell me no, or I have to wait when I’m at the store and see a PS2 game,” Jerry stated after sharing his reflective writing with the group.

As the weeks raced by, and the students continued to collaborate, conference, and independently work on drafting pieces for the project. I decided to begin to wind down the project, but not without doing two more major things.

I wanted to allow the students to hunt in the classifieds for their furniture and real apartments, and I wanted them to write a comparison/contrast piece of their real and fantasy apartments. Since we had previously gone over the budgeting aspect based on their wages, they were well aware of what they and their roommate could afford to rent. I told the students to combine what they had left for rent with what their partner had left for rent. That total would be what they could afford for an apartment. I also told them, “Since I hit the lottery, I am giving each one of you \$800.00 to use to buy furniture for your apartment. Be sure to buy your bedroom items first,” I had warned. “Your bedroom is your private area. Once that is taken care of, you and your roommate can combine the leftover money for your televisions, sofas, tables and other items you want to add. Remember, you can only buy what you can afford. And you may not both use the same classified ad for your bedroom stuff.”

After the experience of finding an affordable apartment, the students began to focus on the furnishings. As I walked around, there were so many exciting conversations and exchanges going on where students were making real-world connections, and collaborating that I felt the need to share these experiences.

\*\*\*

**Jerry:** We have \$200.00 left.

**Tito:** Jerry, we cannot spend all of our money on that fish tank!

**Jerry:** I'm getting a TV for \$50.00, oh yeah, we can't get a TV...we had to cut our cable to afford our rent. We need to keep track of how much we have left.

\*\*\*

I spotted Allie looking intensely at her newspaper with a pen twirling back and forth between her fingers. The serious look on her face told me she was concentrating hard on the task at hand. As she turns to her partner, she says, "I cannot find a TV. Oh, wait, here...color TV 31 inches, \$200.00 dollars."

\*\*\*

**Benny [frustrated]:** We don't have a kitchen...we don't have a living room, we have nothing!

**Steven:** Come on Benny, you take the end, and I'll start at the beginning. We'll read each and every ad. Remember he said that items might be hidden or in with other articles for sale.

\*\*\*

**Mitchell [to a neighboring pair]:** Dag! You bought a lot! All I have is a bed.

**Timmy:** We have mad things. But *he* (pointing to his roommate) wanted to get this TV for 50 dollars and I told him it could get every channel in the world, but no channel to watch because we can't afford cable!

\*\*\*

**Iris:** But we only have one bedroom and one bed in it.

**Peter:** So...we'll buy a sleep sofa. Then one week I'll sleep in the big bed and the next you will. Then me, then you.

\*\*\*

**Steven:** We have \$50.00 dollars left. Do you want to *always* spend money at the laundry? We should use the money to get a washer and dryer. We're going to share almost everything; we gotta spend our money smart.

Allie approached me with a curious look on her face. She and her partner had been working very hard to furnish their apartments.

**Allie:** Can we add our money together for a washer and dryer, or separate the money?

**Mr. Annoni:** whose apartment and money is this?

**Allie:** Ours.

**Mr. Annoni:** whose decision is it to make then?

**Allie:** Ours.

She walked away looking a bit disgusted with the answers I had given her. I know I could have easily made this decision for them, but I wanted them to work together and figure out a plan, or strategy. I wanted them to use thinking skills. This is part of the atmosphere I intentionally set up, and that Carr (1990) described. I casually strolled over to Allie and her partner a minute or two later to find out what their resolution was.

**Mr. Annoni:** What was your decision with the washer and dryer?

**Allie:** He's getting them and I am getting the sofa and two end tables listed here.

**Mr. Annoni:** Which costs more?

**Allie:** The washer and dryer is \$250.00 dollars, the sofa is \$40.00 dollars, and the tables are \$10.00 dollars.

**Mr. Annoni [Laughing]:** Sounds like you're getting away cheaper. How does your roommate feel about that? She turns to her quiet and passive roommate and asked how he felt.

**Allie:** He says he feels okay about it.

**Mr. Annoni:** Why?

**Allie:** He has more money than I do, so it's only right.

**Mr. Annoni:** That's interesting. Is that how you decided who would buy what items?

**Allie:** Yeah, we just did I guess. He had more money left.

**Mr. Annoni:** You seemed frustrated when I told you it was your decision to make in regards to what you buy and how you buy it. Is that how you felt?

**Allie:** I knew that was what the answer would be, but I thought you might forget, slip up and help us.

**Mr. Annoni [jokingly]:** Oh, so you tried to trick me?

**Allie [laughing]:** Yeah.

**Mr. Annoni [laughing]:** Well thanks for being honest, but I'm not that old yet!

These educative experiences, Dewey (1938), were allowing students to put more feeling and thought into their writing. They were able to write based on experience which helped the students to explore and explain, write more and make connections in their writing. Clearly, the budgeting exercise had an impact on these students. They gained both an understanding and appreciation for using money wisely and a burgeoning ability to negotiate what they want from a partner. Bonwell (1991) notes that use of these active learning techniques in the classroom is vital because of their powerful impact upon students' learning. He goes on to point out "If the objectives of a course are to promote long-term retention of information, to motivate students toward further learning, to allow students to apply information in settings, or to develop students' thinking skills, then discussion is preferable to lecture" (p. 1). The discussions and debates that occurred during the exercise challenged the students to think and to gain valuable experience for the future.

Now that the students had their "real" apartments, had to pay rent and bills, and only had a couple hundred dollars to furnish their apartments, I wanted them to take a good look at how all of this compared to the fantasy apartment profiles they had written at the onset of the project.

For this particular lesson, I invited another teacher in to observe and write about what she saw going on. Arhar (2001) encourages teacher researchers to examine their practice from a multiplicity of perspectives as a way to maintain trustworthiness.

I made students aware that their next writing piece would involve telling how their fantasy apartment and real apartment were similar and how they were different. I told them we also call this comparison and contrast. I continued my mini lesson by giving an example of how to compare and contrast two items. I drew a Venn diagram on the board and explained how this tool could help them compare and contrast things. On top of one circle, I wrote the word water bottle. On top of the other, I wrote soap bottle. Where the circles overlapped, I wrote both. I held up a 12 Oz. plastic spring water bottle and a 12 oz. plastic liquid soap bottle. “Who can describe this water bottle for me?” Dana threw her hand into the air and waved it frantically back and forth in hopes of being called on. I couldn’t resist. As she gave me characteristics of the bottle, I wrote them in the appropriate circle. “It’s plastic, it’s clear, it holds liquid, it has a small white cap...” I did the same for the soap bottle, except Steven did the honors of describing. “It’s plastic, it holds a liquid soap, it’s clear, the cap has a nozzle and pump...”

When we finished listing the characteristics for both bottles, I asked the class to look at, and think about what characteristics were the same in both circles. We put them in the overlapping section. Once we finished going through the circles and putting a check next to the similar items and listing them in the

middle, the students went to work drafting. I instructed the students to do the same type of activity with their real and fantasy apartments.

“Do we *need* to do a Venn Diagram?” Peter asked.

“ No, it’s your choice, but be aware that it is a tool which is available to you which may help make things easier for you.” I replied. As I began to walk around and observe the students working, I noticed that all of the students opted to use the Venn diagram to illustrate similarities and differences. Walker’s work (p. 64) is a great example of the work students produced. In his finished copy, he demonstrates good use of spelling, grammar and punctuation. He is also able to describe the various items he has in his apartments and clearly illustrate the difference between his two apartments.

→ My real and fantasy apartments are alike in some ways. Both of them have aquariums. The two aquariums have tropical fish in them. They both have 2 bedrooms too. That's how my real and fantasy apartments are alike.

→ My real and fantasy apartments are different in many ways. The real apartment was unfurnished and the fantasy apartment is furnished. My real apartment has a slot machine and an Xbox. My fantasy apartment has golden doors and an ice cube machine. Both apartments have TVs but the real one has a 46" TV and the fantasy apartment has a wide screen TV. The fantasy apartment has a room on the roof. The fantasy apartment has a leather couch but the real one has a brown couch. The real apartment has a dining room table and chairs but the fantasy apartment has a soft chair. That is how my real and fantasy apartments are different.

While I was recording my observations, Shannon, my colleague, recorded what she saw as well. I've included an excerpt of Shannon's observations here:

Team Work pairs  
conversation  
cooperation  
problem solving  
both members - actively engaged in project

Questions to peer groups ②  
talking out loud to problem-solve  
↓ to self  
and to team member, to other team members

All Curriculum Areas represented  
not just language

Math - calculations  
Science - social living  
Social Studies - community  
Spelling - writing } journal  
Language - writing  
Reading - newspaper

Students remain on tasks throughout the period (work time).

Higher Order Thinking

Students really are thinking planning, and problem solving with each other

Using Newspapers Effectively

I was pleased with the results of her observations. She helped to confirm what I had felt was taking place throughout the project. She observed that “Students really are thinking, planning, and problem solving with each other.” She also pointed out that the students were being exposed to all curricular areas including writing, social studies, science, math, spelling, and reading. Her observations helped me to see my classroom at work through the eyes of a colleague.

With the winter vacation just two days away, I took the time to inform the students that they needed to bring in shoe boxes when they came back after the holiday so that they could create models of their apartments, and my formal data collection came to an end.

### **CHANGES ALONG THE WAY**

Because I was pleased with how well this project transpired with last year’s students, I used many of the ideas I had gotten from my pilot study to help drive this year’s instruction. I was so excited about the outcome that I spoke passionately about it with every student teacher, observer, and parent who entered my room. Naturally, I knew that I could not expect the same results. Nor would I expect to do things in just the same fashion. I also took into account the fact that it was a new year with new students. So what exactly changed between my pilot study and my new research?

Timing was one of my biggest concerns when I planned the current study. The pilot study took place from January to May, and the students knew me and my classroom practices and procedures well. The current study that took place from September to December provided the opportunity for students to engage in

authentic work early in the year, but this fresh group didn't know my policies, my procedures, or me. I worried that I might lose a lot of time trying to acclimate the students to this new writing environment, and with a student teacher arriving in October, I wasn't certain how well the project would proceed. My student teacher did not teach the group of students I chose to observe. However, the students were extremely cooperative and open to the workshop approach we took during the project. They handled the peer-to-peer conferencing quite well and worked as hard in the early part of the school year as their predecessors had in the second.

Since my data collection took place in the beginning of the year as opposed to the end of the year, the number of days available for language arts class was drastically reduced. Factor in the assemblies, conferences and sick days, and it's amazing that we were able to accomplish as much as we did!

Since this was the case, I had to cut a few of my initially planned writing assignments. These included the friendly letter and thank you letter that students in the pilot study wrote to each other after they had "visited" each other's apartments and the persuasive writing that the students in the pilot study wrote to me to convince me to come to their housewarming party. While it was a personal disappointment not to be able to do all of these, I found that this in no way hurt the students' enjoyment of the project and my plan was to have students go on to do these things later throughout the year.

It was interesting to look at the difference in the amount of involvement I had between the pilot study and my recent study. In my pilot study, I did my best to stay out of the way and behind the scenes. I was "invisible" to the students in my pilot study. In this study, I interacted with students on a regular basis. I did

this for several reasons. First, in my pilot study, I was unfamiliar with data collection and took on the role of non-participant observer more frequently than I did in this study. Through continued readings of expert teacher researchers, I was able to gain a better understanding of the various ways to collect data as a participant observer.

Second, my own learning experiences during my period of data collection caused me to look at my practice through my students' eyes. Because my own professors offered guidance and support as I need it, I wanted to do the same for my students.

Finally, I felt that trying to be a non-participant observer would not only deprive my students of valuable learning experiences, but myself as well. After all, I was doing this to make myself a better educator. However, I stuck to my stance as far as letting the students choose and figure out money and decision-making issues between themselves. I wanted to promote the educative experiences that Dewey (1938) described. Educative experiences are those experiences which we find learning through experience. Mis-educative experiences are those which distort the growth of further experience, and non-educative experiences are those which have no learning value.

In my pilot study, we had share circles every week, but this time around we had a total of three. Time was a major factor, and the students didn't push sharing time as much as the pilot students had. This year's class as a whole particularly enjoyed partner checking and found less value in whole group check in. In both classes, the students were still exposed to what others wrote, and they still had the opportunity to offer feedback and constructive criticism.

This time around, I used the Internet along with the newspaper to allow the students to view classifieds. They were also allowed to bring in other bargain seeker publications. Using these extra resources allowed the students more opportunities to find the things they desired.

In my pilot study, I was exposed to, and challenged to use a wide variety of data collection techniques. From that study, I focused on which forms of collection would benefit me the most while ensuring the safety of my students. I chose to eliminate photographs of students engaged in working, audiotapes of interviews, and frequent group conferences. I also noticed that there wasn't as much correspondence between the students and me in their interactive journals because of time. Because of the fact that there was less correspondence through writing, I found that I interviewed more. I felt that the interviews gave me an opportunity to ask follow up questions on the spot and gave me immediate clarification as opposed to having to wait for written responses that may not be so fresh in students' minds. On the other hand, I felt that I may have lost some opinions or suggestions that some students may feel at ease writing. I also lost out on the opportunity to give individual attention to my students. I have included a sample, which shows how one student feels about writing. I would have loved to probe deeper and dialogue everyday with this student through journaling to see what she enjoys and would want. Unfortunately, we only shared a few interactions (See Below). Instead, I opted for things such as pre and post surveys, individual and impromptu interviews, participant observations and questionnaires that I will be discussing further in my analysis section.

## My Thoughts About Writing 10-1-02

Dear Mr. Annoni,

I think writing is kind of ok, as long as it's about something interesting. For example My Fantast Apt. but if I like something about myself then I'll still do it but I won't enjoy it.

Your Student,  
[Redacted]

Dear [Redacted],

Tell me why? How can I make writing fun for you? What interests you to write about?

mk  
[Signature]

Dear Mr. Annoni,

well if it is interesting to me and fun to write about I can't get in to it. Right now this apt. thing is really fun. You can't make writing more fun than this.

Your Student  
[Redacted]

What things are interesting to you? What would →

## **METHODS OF ANALYSIS**

“Because analysis and interpretation are an ongoing part of the action research process, we want to consider how we make sense of the data. By anticipating how we will make sense of these data, the task of analysis and interpretation becomes more manageable” (Arhar 2001). (p. 191)

Throughout the project, I kept an observation log. Keeping track of my thoughts and feelings allowed me to write personal comments, hunches, ideas and observer comments. From these comments, I was able to find patterns and begin to formulate meanings, which helped me to begin to analyze my data.

My field log also contained many valuable one or two word comments in the margins from my support group, professor, and me. These comments (codes) were used to capture meaning, which enabled me to discern relationships, and patterns. I went back through my field log each week and listed each code, the number of times it appeared, and the page number it was on. From there, I found similar codes and placed them into a particular category, or bin. After that, I was able to create theme statements about each bin, which allowed me to interpret the data. As Ely (1997) notes, “these are the basis for lifting to a more abstract theme statement or other interpretive presentation” (p. 162).

I wrote analytic memos, which are personal field notes to ourselves, helping us to notice things that we did not notice before (Arhar 2001). I wrote analytic memos, looking at my work from the philosophical viewpoint of Dewey, Freire, Hooks, and Vygotsky. Each time I wrote the memos, I focused on how

my work fit within this framework and how I could change my practice to enhance students' learning.

I also considered my pilot study to suggest questions about the data as well. I looked for key patterns of behavior, thinking and ideas that appeared in both studies and came to initial conclusions based on that.

I used a pre and post pictorial rating scale (See Appendix A) to look at how students' attitudes changed over time. I looked at each question, and calculated the number of students who answered always, sometimes, and never in both surveys. From there, I was able to measure which ideas and feelings had changed. I gave students a Writing questionnaire (See Appendix B). After looking over each of them, I was able to make conclusions about the students' feelings based on their responses. The following tables illustrate the results of the pictorial rating (See Appendix A) scale and the language questionnaire (See Appendix B).

### Pictorial Rating Scale

Question		Always	Sometimes	Never
1	Pre Survey	1	11	0
	Post Survey	1	11	0
2	Pre Survey	1	11	0
	Post Survey	5	7	0
3	Pre Survey	2	9	1
	Post Survey	1	11	0
4	Pre Survey	6	5	1
	Post Survey	8	4	0
5	Pre Survey	10	2	0
	Post Survey	6	5	0

What I noticed is that in the three month time span between the pre and post surveys, students showed an increase from never and sometimes to always in finding it easy to write well, (Question #2) and having the teacher read what they have written (Question #4). On the other hand, I noticed there was a decrease in the amount of students from always to sometimes when it came to writing in school whenever they had the chance (Question #3), and feeling good about turning their writing in (Question #5). This confuses me because it seems that if students enjoy having the teacher read their work, then they would have no ill feelings when it came to turning in their work. There is a good chance that a student may have answered these questions based on all of the classes they have and perhaps may not like to turn their writing in for math or science.

I know that in the future I will need to change these questions a bit and make them more specific to my class and the project.

For the writing questionnaire that was given closer to the end of the project, I asked the students 9 questions. I focused on the last two questions which asked the students to rate on a scale of 1-5 (1 being bad and 5 being great) how they felt about writing last year, and how they felt this year.

### Writing Questionnaire

	1	2	3	4	5
Last Year	(2)		(3)	(8)	
This Year			(1)	(1)	(11)

What I learned in looking at this feedback was that there was a positive increase in the way students felt about writing last year, and this year. The one thing that I have come to recognize is that these two questions need to be more specific towards my language class and the writing we do in there. Students may enjoy writing in every other class except mine. The question is too general. I was confident however, that many of their views changed based on answers to other questions that were more specific to my class such as: You have been doing a lot of writing in language since September. How do you feel about the amount you have done? I have included Tito's answer that helps to illustrate my point here.

3) I like writing a lot more than last year.  
I'm writing a lot more than last year. It  
is better because we keep on writing until  
the end of class.

4. I liked interviewing and the budgeting.

5. Being able to write stories.

## MORE DISCOVERIES

In referring back to the section in my work entitled **THE NEW JOURNEY** (p. 16), I noted that one of my main goals was to improve students' fluency, clarity, correctness Mahyer (1983) and creativity. I utilized these terms as a framework to present my findings.

Mahyer (1983) states that we should emphasize *fluency* first. "In stressing *fluency*, the goal is to build a sense of comfort, confidence, and control in the growing writer. Young writers must feel that they have ideas and a language system in their heads and that they can combine these to fill up blank sheets of paper." (p. 4) Since I began this project, I've noticed an increase in the amount of writing the students have done. I think back to Dana and Misty's work that I shared earlier. Their work went on for several pages and they were able to write a descriptive work with comfort and confidence because they weren't restricted or bound to the textbook format. Another example that comes to mind is when my student teacher introduced descriptive writing to the other classes that I did not collect data on. She used a traditional textbook and overhead, and followed the prescribed plan in the teacher's manual for presenting the lesson. Most students limited their writing to the prescribed paragraph, and the writing seemed dry and lifeless. When we had gotten to comparison and contrast, the students that had been working my student teacher on descriptive writing did not have very much to work with. I had to spend extra time to allow the other classes to re-write a descriptive work the same way I did with the group I was collecting data on. This is similar to

Dewey's (1938) description of traditional education. Traditional education consists of heavy use of textbooks, knowledge being given by the experts, students taking on a docile and obedient role, and using content that doesn't change. On the other hand, Dewey's (1938) progressive education stresses free activity learning, experience learning, individuality, and a focus on the present day. I found that breaking from the traditional and utilizing Dewey's progressive education model allowed the students to work together freely, conference, explore and learn about writing skills. It also helped the students to focus on details when writing, proofread and edit more accurately, compromise, problem solve, gain newspaper skills, budget and use money wisely. When I asked the students to tell me about their ultimate fantasy apartment, they wanted to write and most opted to tell me more rather than less. I did not use overheads or the ELA text. The material was presented in a way that was somewhat realistic and meaningful to them. Although they did not have the money to afford the luxuries many wanted, their desires and dreams were real enough to them, to inspire them to write, and perhaps contributed to the increased number of students who answered with confidence that they enjoyed having the teacher read their work.

Next, Mahyer (1983) notes that "only when words fill the page can we emphasize *clarity*." (p. 4) *Clarity* according to Mahyer (1983) asks does the writing make sense to others? Throughout this work, I often found that during peer conferencing, students would ask each other if something made sense to them or if it sounded correct. Writing about something they could relate to or had just gone through allowed them to organize their thoughts easier than just

being assigned a topic to write about from the text. Partners often challenged each other to think of other ways to phrase sentences, thoughts, or ideas based on what they had read or heard. The students grew accustomed to conferencing and I found that they regularly asked one another “Who is your audience? Who are you writing for?” The impact of peer collaboration and conferencing along with the real-life scenarios helped to increase clarity in students’ work.

“The final concern is whether or not the text conforms to the conventions of standard written English and is, therefore, correct” Mahyer (1983). I found that this is where students experienced the most trouble. While students did put a great deal of effort into trying to spell things correctly (refer back to Jill and Tamara p. 31), or make sure grammar and punctuation were correct, they weren’t always successful. This could be due to the amount of exposure they have had to conventions in the past. Many may simply study for the punctuation test, apply it then, and forget about it. Some things are just easy to forget. I know that as adults, we are guilty of misspelling words or adding punctuation where it is not needed. I tried not to place as much emphasis on this component of the writing project because I just wanted them to write. “It’s safe to say that there are millions of Americans for whom writing is a crippling burden, one to be avoided whenever possible, and that most of them got that way through a correctness-first, clarity-second, and fluency-sometimes-later-if-at-all approach” Mahyer (1983). This is something I chose to avoid especially when it came to Joseph. An excerpt from the interview I

conducted with him shows the benefit of focusing on real-life situations to improve fluency and clarity first in order to avoid the turn offs of correctness.

**Mr. Annoni:** Did you write a lot last year?

**Joseph:** Yeah, we wrote a lot last year.

**Mr. Annoni:** How did you feel about it?

**Joseph:** I really did not like it.

**Mr. Annoni:** Why not?

**Joseph:** Usually writing hurt my hands when we wrote for like an hour. I used to like it but last year I didn't. We wrote for like two hours with stories and stuff.

**Mr. Annoni:** Was it the length of time you wrote, or the stuff you had to write about that you didn't like?

**Joseph:** Both. Sometimes I'd forget things I wanted to write, or I'd just write to get through it and I'd have a short paper.

**Mr. Annoni:** You have been doing a lot of writing in language since September. How do you feel about the amount you have done?

**Joseph:** I feel pretty good.

**Mr. Annoni:** Why do you feel pretty good?

**Joseph:** Because in language I can share a lot of things like my life. It's fun and maybe I just might become what I picked in my job.

I was happy to see that Joseph confirmed the change in his attitude towards writing. In the beginning of the year, he would always have his head on his desk and just seem disinterested. Now, he comes in with his head up, is very vocal and active in the work, and tries his best. I've found that he prefers to be

allowed to write freely and be creative as opposed to being confined to following textbook rules and procedures.

Four emergent themes that I “lifted” Ely (1997) from my field log were:

- **Student Ownership:** The students were given the freedom to make decisions that helped guide the lesson. The opportunity to choose what type of job or what furniture to buy allowed students to gain “real life” experiences which helped them to make connections when it came to their writing. (See Jerry’s work p.56) In my study students had a voice in their learning. I found that they were empowered to make decisions with me, their partners, or on their own. This freedom and empowerment allowed the students to form positive attitudes towards writing and the writing process that was evident in their willingness and enthusiasm to want to write daily. It was also evident in the amount of work students turned in, and the clarity of it.
- **Student Interactions:** The students were given the opportunity to interact in numerous ways for the good of the project. Collaborating and conferencing allowed the students to become more aware of clarity and correctness in their writing.
- **Teacher Actions:** The teacher played an important role as facilitator. My job was to set up the real life scenarios that allowed for the learning experiences to take place. I found that this project adopted a humanistic approach to teaching. It was taught in the sense that I was not an oppressive teacher who would not let

students have a voice or a choice as Hooks would describe, nor did I make deposits of knowledge based on Freire's (1970) banking system. There was a safe environment where students felt comfortable enough to take risks without fear of being told there was only one right and wrong way.

- Student Reactions: The students' reactions allowed for an open, honest view of the project. From these views, I was able to get a better understanding of how the students felt about writing, working together (see Peter and Iris's interview p. 43), and the overall project.

### **THE NEXT JOURNEY**

Since action research is an ongoing process that continues to raise new questions and pose new challenges, I have decided to focus on the following issues:

- How I can teach grammar in the context of this writing project? I would like to discover ways that I could teach more mini lessons on parts of speech.
- How I can use this project to teach conventions without turning the students off to writing?
- How I can involve parents weekly?
- How I can further use technology (perhaps power point presentations, word publishing) to enhance the project?
- How I can include third grade so that students will be better prepared for the start of the project?

- How can I help students revise?

Most of these issues will be explored and implemented in the fall of 2003.

In conclusion, this study has caused me to focus more on my own practice and has made me more aware of the benefits of teacher research. The experience allowed me to teach and learn. I was able to reflect on my own practice while I was practicing, just as Freire (1993) suggested.

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## APPENDIX A

Circle the face that shows how you feel about the question.

1. I Enjoy Writing.



Always



Sometimes



Never

2. I find it easy to write well.



Always



Sometimes



Never

3. I write in school whenever I can.



Always



Sometimes



Never

4. I like to have my teacher read what I have written.



Always



Sometimes



Never

5. I feel good when I turn my writing in.



Always



Sometimes



Never

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Writing Questionnaire**

- Did you write a lot last year? How often? How did you feel about it?
- You have been doing a lot of writing in language since September. How do you feel about the amount you have done?
- Have your feelings towards writing changed at all? How? Why?
- What are 2 memorable writing moments you've had in here so far?
- What makes writing fun for you?
- How do you feel about working with a partner on some projects?
- What are the lessons you have learned so far throughout our writing project? Will you use them in the future? Why? How?
- On a scale of 1-5 (1 being bad and 5 being great) How did you feel about writing last year?

On a scale of 1-5 (1 being bad and 5 being great) How do you feel about writing this year?

## APPENDIX C

Dear Parents,

September 17, 2002

Over the last two years, I have been completing courses towards a Master's Degree at Moravian College in order to remain aware of the most effective methods of teaching and to provide the best experience that I can afford your child.

One of the requirements of Moravian's program is that I conduct a systematic study of my own teaching practices. During the fall 2002 school year, 4<sup>th</sup> grade language students will be involved in an action research project to investigate how the use of real-life scenarios will affect their writing. They will be working with a partner to learn about various responsibilities of living in an apartment including budgeting money, using the newspaper to find jobs and furniture, and creating a model of their apartment. Throughout their learning, they will be writing about their experiences using compare/contrast, descriptive writing, reflective narratives, interviews, persuasive writings, and invitations. All of these types of writing fit into our 4<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum.

The expected duration of this entire project will be from September 26<sup>th</sup> to December 16<sup>th</sup>. The activities will not take place every single day due to the fact that we will also need to satisfy our parts of speech and other grammar issues. My intent is to have the writing activities taking place every other week.

Since this is for my class, I have developed several procedures to reduce risk to students that include: Allowing students to be open and honest with me and giving them the opportunity to communicate any needs at any time. I am sending this written information to you and my principal. I will honor the right of the student to withdraw from the study, and most important, confidentiality. Confidentiality and anonymity will be assured through the use of pseudonyms and placing research data in a secure location such as a locked filing cabinet. Once the research has concluded, and I have formally written my findings to be published, I will destroy the data via paper shredder.

There are several expected benefits your child will gain as a result of this study. First, their writing will improve in the areas of fluency, clarity, and correctness. The students will not view writing as a punishment. The students will learn valuable life skills and lessons such as budgeting, and how to use the classified ads of the newspaper to find bargains, jobs, and housing. They will also benefit from the problem solving skills they will need to utilize when working with a partner.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which your child is otherwise entitled. Please keep in mind that refusal to participate means that your child's data will not be used in the study, not that he/she will be released from the class curriculum. I will not use the data, but he/she will still do the activities. If your child decides to discontinue permission to use their data, I will inform you in writing. Should you decide to discontinue permission to use your child's data, please feel free to call me at \*\*\*\_\*\*\*\*.

Please direct questions about this research and the subject's rights to me at \*\*\*\_\*\*\* or E-mail. I would also like for you to sign this consent form and return it to me.

Sincerely,

Greg Annoni

I have read this form with my parent and they have explained it to me so I understand it. Mr. Annoni has also gone over it with me in class.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date:

\_\_\_\_\_  
I attest that I am the child's parent, guardian, or legal representative and that I have read and understand this consent form, and have received a copy.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D

September 16, 2002

Dear Principal,

Over the last two years, I have been completing courses towards a Master's Degree at Moravian College in order to remain aware of the most effective methods of teaching and to provide the best experience that I can afford my students.

One of the requirements of Moravian's program is that I conduct a systematic study of my own teaching practices. During the fall 2002 school year, 4<sup>th</sup> grade language students will be involved in an action research project to investigate how the use of real-life scenarios will affect their writing. They will be working with a partner to learn about various responsibilities of living in an apartment including budgeting money, using the newspaper to find jobs and furniture, and creating a model of their apartment. Throughout their learning, they will be writing about their experiences using compare/contrast, descriptive writing, reflective narratives, interviews, persuasive writings, and invitations. All of these types of writing fit into our 4<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum.

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There are several expected benefits my students will gain as a result of this study. First, their writing will improve in the areas of fluency, clarity, and correctness. The students will not view writing as a punishment. The students will learn valuable life skills and lessons such as budgeting, and how to use the classified ads of the newspaper to find bargains, jobs, and housing. They will also benefit from the problem solving skills they will need to utilize when working with a partner.

Please direct questions about this research and the subject's rights to me at \*\*\*-\*\*\*\*, or E-mail. I would also like for you to sign this consent form and return it to me.

Sincerely,

Greg Annoni

I attest that I am the principal and that I have read and understand this consent form, and have received a copy.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_