

Bridging the Gap Between Expository and Authenticity

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TE 848

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April 21, 2011

Over the past six months I have sat in my classroom contemplating what will make my students become better writers. Day after day they sit in their rectangular shaped desks brainstorming ideas from what they did over the weekend, to what they hope to become in the future. With each one of their ideas the lead to their number two pencils roll across the paper from left to right, and sometimes right to left, in hopes of expressing themselves to their readers in some profound way. Yet, with each page they turn their crisp loose-leaf notebooks are filled, line upon line, with only the spoken word of personal narratives, fairytales, and realistic fiction. That is their life and that is what they express to the world. Unfortunately, that is not the only genre in which they are expected to be competent in.

In the many months of writing my students have completed during our writer's workshop not one of my children has delved into informational writing. It has only been when they were forced to write within that genre, or when expository texts were the purpose of my writing mini-lessons that they actually attempted to write within the genre. However, even with those attempts their writing was lacking. Expository writing has been said to be very difficult for children as Jacobs says, "One reason this is so is that their information backgrounds are less fully developed than is their imagination" (Jacob, 89). So they don't delve into the content and actually become their informational writing, because expository texts are so far removed from them. They think they have to be a certain way, laid out fact by fact, with no voice, details, or personal experience. Often students are so used to writing personal narratives and within fictional genres that when they try to write expository they have difficulty. Fletcher says, "The kids grudgingly make the transition, but the voice in their writing does not survive" (Fletcher, 76). It is that skating which also shows me their lack of engagement and involvement with informational text. They do not have a desire to do it or much knowledge about it and that lack of desire hurts them when they get to third grade and beyond where they will begin to take standardized tests and writing artifacts for the district. Daniels says, "In an era of high stakes testing for students, teachers, and schools alike, 70 -80% of the reading content on standardized tests is informational (Daniels, 2002). Therefore, if a student cannot read an informational text, nor write an informational text then it is highly unlikely that they will be able to understand the content which is actually manifested from them. Daniels thoughts echo in my ear everyday as students in Michigan have to take the statewide MEAP test, where scholarship money and school power lay in the balance of eight year olds and beyond. If students do not do well on these tests then they are the ones who lose out.

Not to mention they live in the 21st century with dozens of influential modes of information surrounding them from magazine articles, newspapers, television broadcasts, and other various multimedia generated through the internet. It is essential that all students be exposed to expository writing from various different mediums, as expository writing is a genre that students must understand in order to be successful (Montelongo & Hernandez, 1). Therefore, because it is essential, yet also a road less traveled by because students don't naturally

gravitate to those genres then it must be taught differently. Jacobs says, “Expository writing requires a quite different approach to creativity to the part of the writer” (Jacobs, 89).

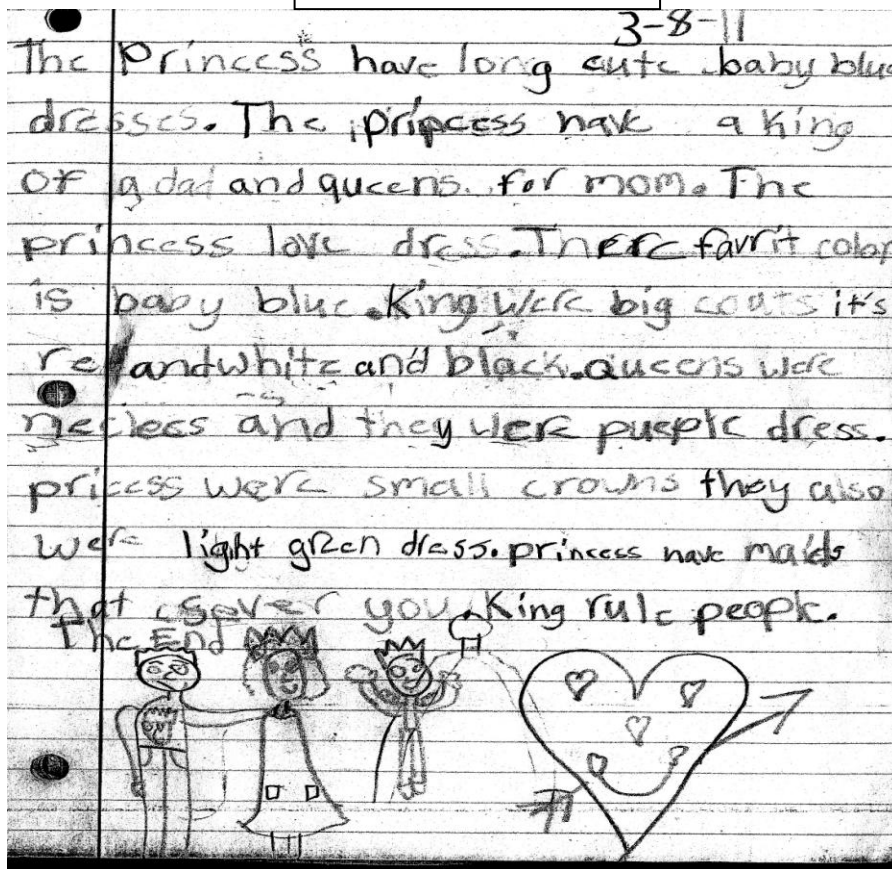
Through my research I have found that we can bridge the gap between expository writing and students through authentic activities. Scully and Roberts indicate that, “Curriculum planned with concrete materials, direct experiences, and hands on activities builds bridges between the increasingly abstract content children are required to study in the early grades and their unique ways of learning” (Scully & Roberts, 93). For that reason, through my own interactions with my students and numerous articles from Fletcher to Williams I have found that when students understand expository writing and can relate it to their world they are much more apt to develop a comfort with expository test, whereby they are more willing to take risks. Some of the authentic activities in which were designed to set my students up to take more risks and develop a level of comfort were in the form of peer collaboration, role-play, questioning, and trade books which highlighted voice.

My 3 Focus Students

There were three focus students in which I decided to gear in on through my unit on expository writing. I tried to pick students that were very different from one another, but students which would represent the bulk of my students. I wanted to show where they were at the beginning of my unit done on expository writing and then where they ended the unit at. Those three students were Jacqueline, Christian, and Madison.

Jacqueline was a student that reminded me so much of myself when I was younger. I knew the answers to almost everything, and had great ideas, yet I was too shy to share it with the rest of my classmates. Jacqueline was a very quiet, reserved young lady, who was always focused, and in many ways internally motivated to complete any and every task. Yet, just like everyone else I also saw areas of improvement which I wanted to push on to her. She didn't smile as much as I thought a young child should. She had those cute deep dimples in the sides of her cheeks that rarely saw the light of day and hardly did I ever see her talk to anyone else in the classroom. That made me worry about her and her ability to know the world and the people in it. Before beginning our many lessons on expository writing I only once seen Jacqueline pick up the pencil to write down an informational writing on what she knew. Her writing was always composed of personal narratives, poems, and a few fragments of fiction. When asked what her favorite genre was she said personal narratives and she lacked much voice in her writing.

Jacqueline's Prewriting



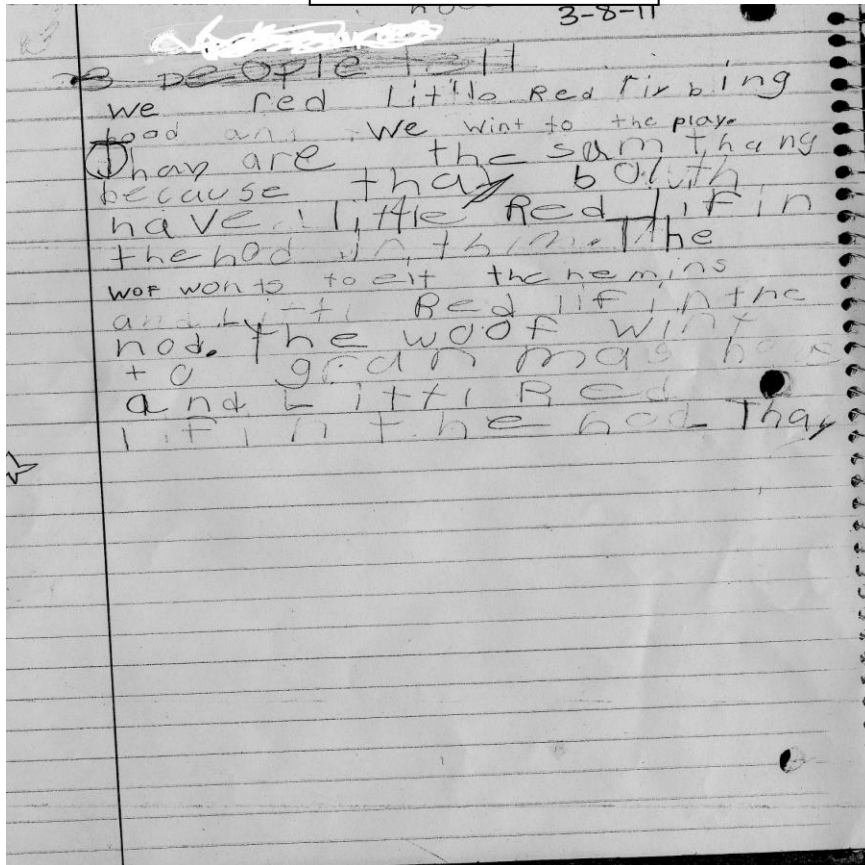
Jacqueline's informational prewriting was about a royal family. Something she knew through movies and books that she had read. She included lots of detail in her writing about clothing, but not much of anything else. Her work was full of adjectives to describe her topic, but it was still missing something. Her lead began with, "The princess have long cute baby blue dresses," and that was the way she introduced her writing. It

wasn't eye-catching. It wasn't striking, and literally the base of her writing told mostly the facts about their wardrobe, as she included sentences like, "The princess loves dresses," and "Queens wear necklaces and they wear purple dresses." There was no real substance and direction in which she knew where to take her writing to next. In essence her writing was dull, lacking something, and far removed from her.

Christian on the other hand was a young child who you always have to keep an eye on. He was a sneaky one and a student who was not by any means motivated to complete any task, especially when it came to writing. Unless there was a reward for doing so. Writing was the thing that he dreaded the most as he couldn't find the right sentence starters, could not find the details to go in his writing, nor could he find a logical way to end his writing. Unsurprisingly with all of the difficulties he had with writing his own inner voice in his writing lacked greatly. He would always be a child that wanted to write with everyone else, but when it came to writing by himself he just could not do it. When I asked him what the problem was, he replied on several occasions with, "I can't think of anything that I want to write about," or would simply ramble about unconnected ideas just to make it look as if he had accomplished the task that was asked of him. Before beginning our unit on expository writing he had only once wrote an expository text in our class, nor was he interested in informational readings during silent and

independent reading time. He was more interested in comics and writing for the purpose of entertaining.

Christian's Prewriting



Christian's prewriting was about little red riding hood as he compared a movie to a book. Virtually all of his writing began with "we" or "the." His writing never lacked personal connections. It only told the facts of the comparisons he figured out between the play he saw and the book he read. He ended with a simple, "The wolf went to grandma's house in little red life in the hood." There was never an eye catching ending, leaving the reader informed and with a good conclusion. In many ways his writing was not

organized in a clear beginning, middle, or an end, he was just putting words together that sounded good which would accomplish the task in which he was asked to complete. It was like he was trying to put together a puzzle that had all the wrong pieces. His writing too was dull, lacking something, and far removed from his own experiences.

Madison was a child that loved to work with other students. Most often I would see her sneaking and crawling around on the floor in the attempt of trying to communicate with other students during writing time. When she was forced to write by herself she just could not come up with a whole lot to write about. Only when I was sitting right there by her side would she complete her tasks. However, when she would sit down and concentrate wonderful details flew from her brain. She was very descriptive, but informational texts were also a genre in which she was not drawn too. Her writing, though not lacking as much as the other two students was still far removed from her own experiences.

Madison's Prewriting

3-11-11 AMERICAN
Flag
The American flag has 50 stars on it
for the 50 states. Its blue and white
and red. We live in America some
people live in different states. America
has a lot of people that live in my
state. That is America. Some of
my family lives in Alabama. Like
my aunt and cousin and my aunts
dog. His name is honey. He is a cute
dog. America is a fun state and
Alabama.

The End

In Madison's prewriting she wrote about the American flag we had learned about in Social Studies. She included a lot of details about what the flag looked like and then her own background knowledge of the United States. She also included some connections she had with her family members living in some states. However,

even with her connections I was still hoping to hear more of her voice and more of her own personal flare in her writing. Her writing too was dull, yet closer to her life.

Before really diving into expository writing my three students didn't really connect with the task at hand. They didn't ask questions on what would make their writing better and virtually they had no experience in writing within that genre. So they organized their thoughts from their own experiences. Their writings lacked voice, lacked an understanding of informational writing, and lacked an authentic interaction with expository text. Their lack of understanding reflected in their work.

Setting:

The setting in which I taught my students how to develop an understanding for expository writing consisted of an urban education setting where 15 out of 19 students received free or reduced lunch. The racial demographic makeup of my students included 8 African American students, 1 Latino student, 1 Native American student, and 9 Caucasian students of various different European descents. The classroom itself was colorful, full of literacy rich print and a plethora of personal narratives, poetry, realistic fiction, and fantasy books. As a teacher I loved narratives and poetry, while also writing within those genres. However, what the classroom

itself was missing was the displaying of informational texts on the book shelves. Before teaching the students about informational writing I hadn't even noticed that the collection of books that lay on my book stands were the same genres that I took a liking to.

In effort to teach my students to love informational texts on a budget I had to re-evaluate my choice of books in the limelight. In reading some of the work drawn together by Nell Duke I found that she wrote an article on the reasons why expository texts were so hard for students to learn. Her findings stated that, "young children lacked early exposure to exposition," and that lack of exposure was heavily represented in my classroom as my repertoire of trade books which highlighted informational writing were scarce (Moss, 711). In combating that dilemma I searched for books that I could use in my classroom. Not just books I could read to the class, but books that were accessible to my children, whether they wanted to read it in class, take them outside for recess, or take them home. So I called a representative from my local library to see if they had any books in donation that I could have. I wasn't hoping for much, but luckily, my contact scrambled up not only one box of books but a total of five boxes, with one box exploding of informational text to be eaten up by the children.

Setting up the Environment

Once I had the materials to start our discovery on informational writing one of the most important things I needed for my students to understand was the actual process behind why they were reading and writing informational texts. I wanted for them to see the real world connections with newspapers, standardized tests, trade books, multi-media, television, and various other modalities in their life (Montelongo & Hernandez, 1). However, even if they understood the text they needed to be able to understand the process by which they came to their conclusions, otherwise they would cease to use the strategies they learned after all was said and done. They needed to be able to review their own background knowledge, ask questions about the world and the materials in it, and then go out and search for those answers on their own without an adult stepping on their shoulders with every move they made. Questioning was the authentic activity in which they needed to be able to do. Williams says that, "These experiences guide students toward the understanding that readers ask questions as they interact with a text and that readers should stop and ask for clarification when comprehension breaks down" (Williams, 280). So for two weeks before my students even wrote within the informational genre we observed informational texts through a genre study, orally professing what we learned (Read, 37). We made observations about what informational text included and we questioned whether or not every text had to function in the same way each time. Additional questions we asked were evolved from Jacobs, "How did the writer introduce the content? How did the writer sequence the ideas presented? ...How did he or she conclude the book?" (Jacobs, 92). In asking those questions and setting the framework of informational texts the students really delved into their own examples of expository writing and what they believed it to be, not some function of their teacher's own mental aptitude. At that point it was okay for them to say, "I agree," and "I

don't agree...but here's why." Through questioning my students were to become logical beings, seeing and hearing informational text through their own unique questions. It was essential that they question before they even picked up a pencil and paper to write down their own ideas on exposition.

In doing so they realized that informational text could give useful information about almost anything, from the ingredients in an ice cream cone, to the land features of mountains and caves. Some informational text included bold words and headings, while others deeply intertwined structures of voice and description to describe their subject. In doing so they could also include their opinions and details within the text to keep the reader reading and intrigued. Once they formulated those ideas I modeled to the students with a KWL chart what good readers and writer's did when they are about to embark upon a writing exploration. We took the topic of landforms, as we were studying it in science and we noted what we already knew to be true about landforms, and what we wanted to know about those landforms. The L portion of their chart would be fulfilled by the three activities we did with informational writing.

Activity 1

Throughout the course of my unit on informational writing one of the things that I really wanted my students to focus on was the actual content itself through authentic activities. On several occasions I had noticed that most of my children would ask, "can I write a story with Arieonna, can we work together?" And those questions really got me thinking about what my students wanted. Often I would tell them that I wanted to see their ideas and not the ideas of their partner but since informational text were uninteresting to them I wanted to find a way to motivate them to work with one another and feel comfortable in their own skin. In the article titled *Teaching Against the Grain: One Title 1 School's Journey toward Project Based Literacy Instruction* the authors indicated that when they were engaging students to achieve a task they used project based instruction where, "after learning about the polar regions and animals that inhabit them, students choose one animal to research and write about" (Parsons, Metger, Askew, & Carswell, 7). Therefore I allowed for them to work with partners and to choose their own topics to research. I found that when students were given the option of choosing their own topics they were much more engrossed in learning about them. Only when they were forced to write about uninteresting topics did I have to rustle and tussle with them to start and complete their work.

I had the students pick out the topic that they wanted out of twenty book selections within our newly designed library. One other person chose that topic with them. The students were really excited and eager to embark upon the task. They had to record their background knowledge of the topic and then use their trade books to find out more information to record on their research papers (appendix 1). After finding out all of that information the students collaboratively created their own book cover illustrations and then wrote their own informational

writings. During the course of the whole process out of nine groups I only had to worry about one group not being on task. They were eagerly engaged in the task, were conversing with one another, and actively involved in the task at hand. Letting their guard down with their partners.

One of the things I thought that the children were going to spend a lot of time concentrating on was making their writing grammatically correct and sound. In general, during writing time students concentrate so much on spelling that they lose their focus often in writing. Read says, "This may reflect the very nature of writing for primary age children-the very act of writing involves constant attention to spelling as they translate the talk and thought into written form" (Read, 42). I was sure this was going to happen as they were interacting with words that they had never heard before, let alone read before. But they didn't do that. If the students had questions they asked one another and if those questions could not be answered between the two of them then that is when they consulted me. They had become vulnerable with one another, not hiding their thoughts. They were finally taking risks. Not one student asked me, "ow do I spell this word?" and that told me that the students were so invested with their work as they used their partners as valuable resources. They literally spent two hours of the morning researching the information, drawing their illustrations, and then putting together their stories in a way which made sense to them. As I walked around the classroom I raised the question, "How do we start out our informational stories?" And "If we want our introduction to be something that makes our reader want to read more than what can we say?" In doing this the students began to think about how they normally start their stories and creative innovative ways to start their new stories.

Activity 2:

For the second activity the students were given the opportunity to interview another child in our classroom. They were given a list of questions to help them start the discussion with one another, but for the most part they were given the freedom to ask the questions that they wanted to ask, as long as they were appropriate. Once they completed the list of questions and had enough information to write a story on them they were given construction paper to make covers and loose leaf paper to write their expository writings all about their partner. I really wanted the students to focus in on the voice that was inside of them. For this assignment we reviewed on several occasions how to make their writing really showcase who they were and what they were talking about. We wrote using adjectives, show-not tell, and informational trade books which reflected voice from books like, *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* by Julius Lester, *Milk Makers* by Gail Gibbons, and *Volcanoes* by Seymour Simon. Fletcher says, "When students write with voice, they put the indelible stamp of their personalities on their information-they make it their own" (Fletcher, 79). When students make their writing their own they develop ownership and that very ownership boosted their confidence under a genre in which they didn't really have that much confidence in to begin with.

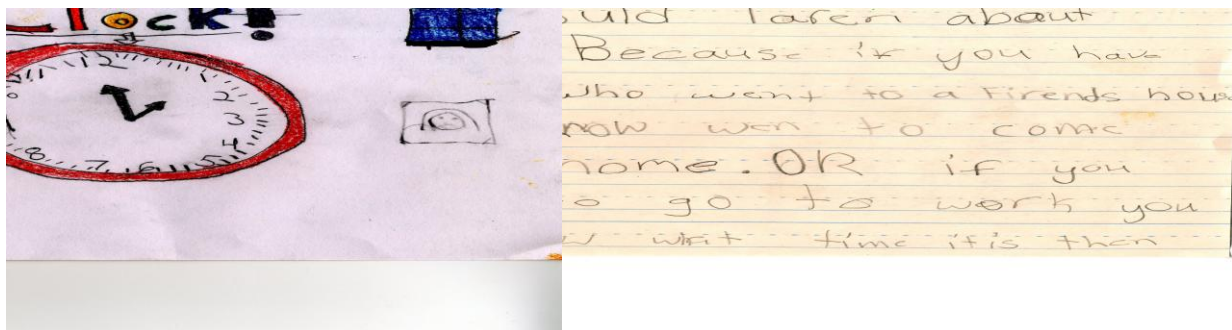
After students finished their assignments the real show began. The students were given the authentic activity of interviewing their partner in front of the class. They were given materials to make props for their interview and then they presented it to the class. The visual presentations were where the students really shined. In many ways the actual writings did not touch the interviews that students put together with their props. Scully and Roberts say that, “curriculum planned with concrete materials, direct experiences, and hands on activities build bridges between the increasingly abstract content children are required to study in the early grades and their unique ways of learning” (Scully & Roberts, 93). The students were invested in the activities and were anxious to learn about their partner and relay that to the world. They made props which consisted of microphones, clothing, and some of their favorite things from pictures of SpongeBob, to pictures of themselves.

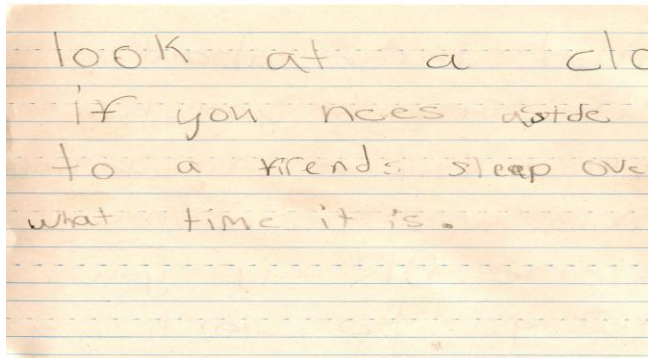
Activity 3

The last activity that we did as a whole class was look at magazine articles and articles in the newspaper. We used the strategies and knowledge we had learned from activity one and two and the students came up with their own topics about what they wanted to inform people about. They had to choose a topic that was important to them but a topic that was also newsworthy. It was important that they put their voice in their writing, while also finding a catchy lead, middle, and ending that showcased their knowledge.

Results

Jacqueline's Post Writing

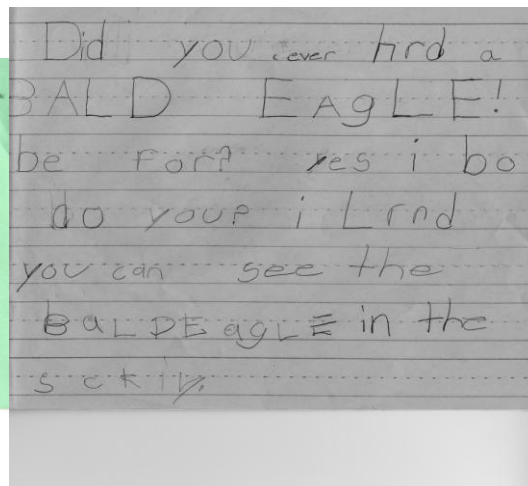


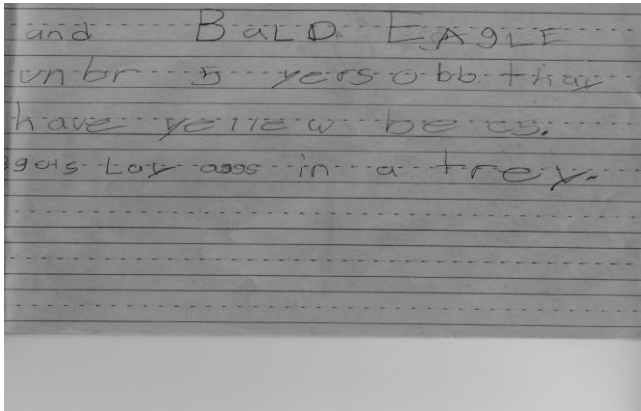


Jacqueline's post writing was worlds from her pre writing. Jacqueline started her writing off with, "You should learn about time because if you had a child that went to a friend's house they know when to come back home." I really liked the way she pulled in her own thinking using persuasion. We had originally studied persuasion in our class, but never when talking about informational writing did I make the

connection for them. She figured that out all herself. She gave three different situations that would warrant a need to know time and those situations were all worthy. One of the things that were really hard about her subject was that she chose time and time is a hard topic to write about because it doesn't seem to be as concrete as a dolphin or a bicycle. Often you cannot touch or feel time, it just is, so she relayed that perception of time how she saw it. It sounded more like her works of fiction then it did her informational writing. All in all Jacqueline learned how to write an expository text and relate it to real life. It was no longer an abstract concept to her. Though I would have liked to have seen more voice in her writing, and more organization she created her piece as she saw it.

Christian Post Writing



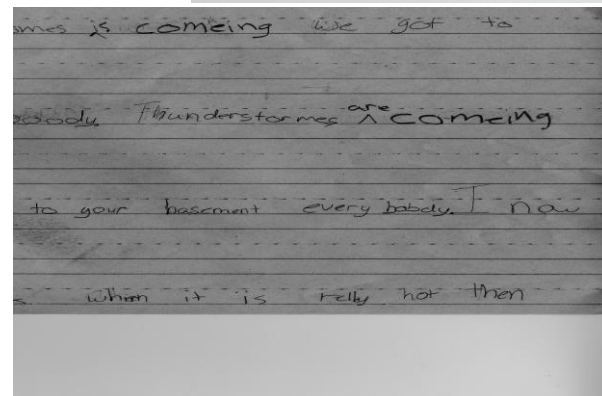
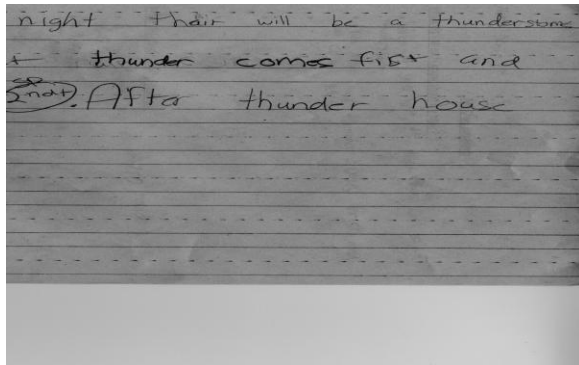


Christian's post writing really did a 180 change. Christian really got me going with the voice he included in his writing. He started his writing off with a catchy introduction, "Did you ever hear of the bald eagle?" His lead to his story really intrigued the students in our classroom and had them raising their hands to answer the question

and read on. He then proceeded to tell us what he learned through a first person account of his experience with his topic. He learned that they had yellow eyes, that they flew in the sky and that they layed their eggs in a tree. This information he told in his story was told in a way that was expressive of who he was. It didn't include a whole lot of ideas but it was a start to where he needed to go when he was talking about the bald eagle. He engaged his reader and you could hear his voice through the questions he asked and his call and response within his writing. In order for Christian to really put voice in his writing he had to engage in questioning the text and that questioning started with teacher modeling. Much of that modeling came from trade books titled under the genre of literary nonfiction. The students knew that their writing should look like them, sound like them, and after reading their audience should be able to feel more connected to them. Christian's writing came a long way from where it started

One of the things that I really wanted to see him do more of though was include more information and let his information just flow within his voice. He would start with his voice and then lose it somewhere in the middle of his writing, but I wanted him to learn that he could keep it. He had a lot of good ideas but that information did not flow into one another, nor was his conclusion fitting for the wonderful introduction that he started out. But overall he attempted informational writing, and he understood it. He took a huge risk and became vulnerable to the process. The depth of how well he will continue to understand it will come with continued practice.

Madison's Post Writing



Madison's post writing began with "A thunderstorm is coming we got to warn everybody. Thunderstorms are coming our way, go to your basement everybody." When she read her writing to the class it really engaged them. Many of the students commented that they felt like they were actually in a thunderstorm and connected their own experiences with the reader's experience. She commented that it didn't feel like she was writing an informational writing, it felt more like she was reading a feature story. Then she went on to talk about the thunder and how it occurred when it got really hot at night time.

Though she didn't have a whole lot of information in her writing she included at least four facts and a catchy introduction and middle within her story. She put herself in it and her reader could really hear her. Her writing was much more organized than Christian's in that it flowed smoother but she also had some transition problems as she tried to adjust from her voice into the actual content of her topic. Even still, just like Jacqueline and Christian she too tried to write expository and she caught her audience's attention through her catchy language and her ability to connect personally with the topic. She too took risks and landed out on top.

Results

Through the use of authentic activities like peer collaboration, questioning, trade books, and role play it was my intention that the students would take the informational text on their own. They would work with partners and they would also be given the opportunities to choose their own

topics. Therefore, they would be engaged. They would be given the openness to question their writing, their partners writing, and what they thought expository to be, therefore, there would be no right or wrong answers. In doing so they would be able to take risks and make their own understanding.

In doing all of these activities with my children there were some key results which occurred. As students were partnered up into groups of twos the students were engaged the whole time. Only one group out of nine was off task. Students were actively asking questions to one another and making sense of the information they were learning all on their own. I also noticed that the students did not fight me on the issue of writing. They weren't crawling around on the floor trying to work with other children, because they were working with other children and acting out their ideas to the class. They also were seemingly more engaged and interested in the topic because they were choosing topics that interested them. Students enjoyed working with partners as it provided them with open dialogue and support for grammatical help, reading troubles, and peer questioning and support. Most of my students were including their voice in their writing through eye-catching leads and introductions. Those introductions allowed for our class to want to read more. All in all the students were taking risks and developing their own understanding about what informational texts were as they saw them.

Overall their writing improved and their exposure to informational text improved through the use of authentic activities which allowed them to take risks and make their own meaning. In the process of doing so they were also excited and eager to write. Woods says, ““When we give adolescents the skills to make sense of the world, to understand and claim their right, we not only improve these individuals and their potential for action in the world, we also improve the potential of the world and increase the power and the promise of democracy itself” (Woods, 22). This exposure gave them the tools they needed to make sense of expository writing. To become it, to be exposed to it, and to see that informational writing was what they made of it and it too could be exciting.

Limitations

I was not impressed by my students' endings. I thought that they could have all been greatly improved if I had taken the time to actually teach them how to write a proper ending. I would have really liked to see the children refine their concluding sentences. Most of them just left their reader hanging, asking the question, “well what come next?” I also think that they would have benefited from an organizer other than a web to outline their papers. By doing this they would have had a clearly defined introduction, middle, and end.

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