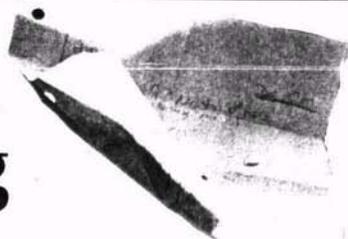


The Untapped Power of Student Note Writing



With minimal effort, just a change in outlook, teachers can further their students' writing through the unlikely mechanism of their own social notes.

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Are you satisfied with your students' writing? Each year, the arrival of the country's writing sample scores spins me on an emotional kaleidoscope. I soar with my students' successes and excuse the failures with the knowledge that it would take 18 writing samples to produce "really valid" scores (Lehmann 1987). All too soon, however, the importance of effective writing for all of my students forces me to search for more effective ways to teach writing. Along the way, I've discovered the untapped power of student social note-writing communities.

Why Notes Are Significant

An effective writing program, Bloom (1986) suggests, would develop the "habit of writing" for the student's own purposes. "Ideally," he says, "the initial writing should be little more than the equivalent of a one-way oral conversation with someone who lives some distance away and doesn't have a telephone" (p. 77). This suggestion is supported by Moffett (1981), Shuy (Staton et al. 1982), and others who argue for a naturalistic language curriculum. They believe that written literacy is acquired through developmental stages much like learning to speak.

Writing instruction, unlike speech, rarely starts prior to school (Staton et al. 1982). Because students are asked to begin writing at the "formal" stage without first acquiring skill or confidence in the prerequisite forms, writing is difficult for them. Some, however, do achieve. Where have they developed the skills and confidence in these earlier stages so they can write formally?

In an earlier study, I found that social note writing is a natural response to real social and emotional needs (Jackson 1988). Shuy's (Staton et al. 1982) and Brooke's (1987) observations concur, but they feel that this type of writing is beyond teacher influence. Gilmore (1984), however, firmly believes that if students' natural language levels are not assessed, no effective match between readiness and instruction can be made for our diverse school populations. To gain insight into my students' natural styles of writing, I began searching for answers to three questions: Which students are writing notes? Which developmental styles are being practiced? How can writing teachers help?

The Course of My Search

If they were being kind, my students considered it peculiar that I wanted to study their notes. In their more critical

moods, they were suspicious. Their notes are "sacred." An informal code of behavior demands protecting the writer from audiences other than the addressee.

One student explains the necessity for privacy:

Telling a friend your problem — at home, with your boyfriend, or best friend, you will feel better inside. The reason for note writing is to have a good communication with yourself. . . . I benefit a lot from writing to my friends, and I know that they use my notes to see my inside feelings. That's why I don't want anyone else to read the notes I write. They're too personal.

Despite this initial resistance, I persisted, and after a year of observing, surveying, and interviewing, I found answers. Six 8th grade students volunteered their note collections for analysis — a total of 412 pages. These students belonged to two distinct note-writing communities: one ranked as high achievers by teachers, the other ranked as low achievers.

Who writes notes? At first, this seemed to be a simple question, but I discovered that its answer is cloaked in layers of subtleties. Survey results alone determined that the students rated poorest by teachers are more heavily engaged in "note trafficking" than the others; girls more than boys. Also, students who prefer to work in groups tend to write more notes. Yet the collections did not match the survey. Eighty-three percent of the low achievers' notes are one page or less. In the high achiever group, only

67 percent of the notes are this brief. Although high achievers may write fewer individual notes, their total volume of writing is much greater than low achievers. I wondered why.

Conversations with students and team teachers suggest that one cause for the discrepancy is time-on-task. One teacher explained, "I have a 'red flag' reaction when a kid who isn't doing work for me passes a note, and I think, 'All that wasted energy that should be going into their social studies.' I have a different reaction if the students are doing their work, too." Are good grades a license to traffic notes?

The results of our schoolwide survey indicate that teachers take action to stop note writing of students who are struggling in their classes 62 percent of the time. However, successful students' notes are ignored (53 percent) only a little more often than the students are corrected (47 percent).

A Variety of Language Styles

Voluntary writing practice is occurring in the middle school, but for some students, this practice is not enough. To assess the language styles practiced by note writers, my six assistants and I numbered and coded each unit of meaning within the note collections for functions based

on the work of Griffin and Shuy (1978); for example,

Reporting opinions/expressing feelings not backed up by reasons: The lectures are sometimes boring, but everything else is pretty fun.

Because any given sentence could have multiple functions, we checked and discussed where each sentence should be placed if there were any problems (see fig. 1).

Next we sorted the functions used into developmental language styles. "Formulaic" writing — such as, "Hi, what's up? Nothing much here. Well, gotta go" — constituted a large, easily identified portion of the writing. We decided that the "casual" form represented routine "bread and butter," "non-school" type of communication that does not require continual dialogue.

We labeled 10 functions "consultative" because they often required exchanges of information for the benefit of both parties. This category

approximates writing required in school that calls for evaluating, predicting, reporting, and requesting general information. Finally, I calculated the percentage of each writing community's use of each function to identify that community's position in the developmental sequence of learning to write.

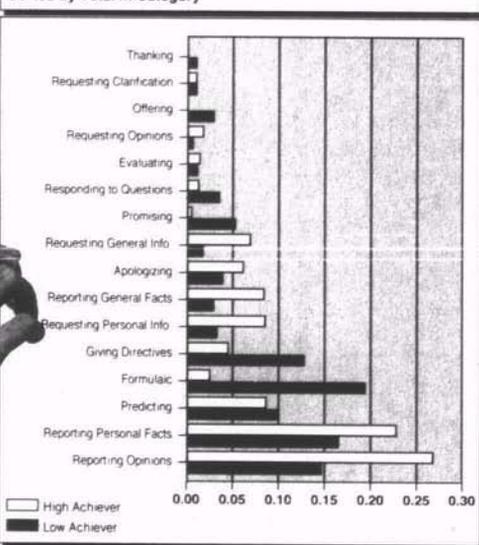
The notes within the low achievers' collections are shorter; therefore, more units of meaning are devoted to greetings and closings than in the fewer, longer notes generated by the high achiever group. Still an impressive 55 percent of these students' thoughts are





FIGURE 1

**CATEGORY OF NOTES
BY STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENT LEVEL**
Sorted by Total in Category



consultative. The differences appear to lie with quantity rather than in quality of the language style. The high achievers seem to spend more of their note-writing time consulting with one another than do the low achievers. The longer the consultation, the more the note resembles formal essay-style writing required for school success.

In dialogue journals, the teacher's responses stimulate growth by modeling an appropriate advance in language function. In note writing, the group's progress depends in part on the level of the group's most advanced member. I needed to know more about the makeup of these discourse communities.

Composition of Student Groups

In individual interviews, the students told me that their groups are "closed" and that note writing is a glue that holds these groups together.

One low achiever reported that she wrote to 20 or so friends at least twice a week, every week like clockwork:

That's just what we do. And I expect notes in return, or I'll think they're mad at me or something.

One high achiever confided that her group was much smaller, only six, but she wrote to them every day:

It's like it is with friendships. Your best friends are jealous if you write to one more than you write to the others. I don't want to get in trouble, which would happen if I wrote to someone else.

One high-achieving boy said he wrote to no one regularly, "That way I avoid the problem of being called snotty for not writing." However, he writes when the need arises; for example, to a classmate who was anxious about her upcoming tonsillectomy:

"I wanted to reassure her. I told her the ice cream part was fun."

Still another girl described her note-writing role as a type of switchboard operator/diplomat:

People from all groups write to me, and I pass on the information. Say if there's a fight brewing, one kid would write to me, and I would write to the person he is mad at and get his side. Then I sometimes try to patch things up. But this can be risky. Say like my group doesn't like me passing notes to the cheerleader types. They might think I'm stuck-up or something. Then I would have no one to write to!

Students at this middle school recognize the form of "good" note writing, but some experience difficulty applying the language functions necessary to achieve the ideal. Their communities are exclusive, which narrows the boundaries within which growth can occur. My goal is to build better writing strategies among all students and not restrict the personal practice of writing, using all language functions, to a select group. I believe this goal can be met by broadening the students' discourse communities, responding to students' needs with compassion, modeling the broad spectrum of language functions, protecting the safety of their chosen topics, and enhancing their feelings of success.

Broaden Note-Writing Communities

Studies of cooperative learning demonstrate that students who work together not only improve academically but also grow to like each other (Johnson and Johnson 1975). Students write naturally to those they know, their friends. Any strategy that increases the number of friends will tend also to increase the size and vari-

ability of the students' note-writing communities.

To encourage the benefits possible from cooperative activities, teachers should focus instruction on group processes, design activities that require interdependence as well as individual accountability, and persevere at insisting students remain in cooperative groups. Only when a group is working well together should you change the membership. Depriving students of direct contact with friends stimulates note writing.

After four months in a cooperative classroom setting, one 8th grade boy said, "I used to write notes only two times a week, and lately I've been writing more. I'm not sure why. Maybe it's because there's more to talk about and more people to talk to."

Because my research assistants were from two distinct note-writing communities, our project was like a cooperative task group. Over time, students who had previously written only during stolen classtime moments began writing at home, where they found the time to write longer notes. "We had to," explained one assistant. "We got separated when we went to high school. If I wanted to tell Jack or Jill something about our work, sure, I could call them. But I couldn't show them something over the phone." And when the project concluded, they still wrote notes. The friendship bond between cliques had been forged.

Respond with Compassion

Many studies have shown that one way to improve student thinking is to give students time to think before calling for a response to a question (Schaffer 1989, Bonnstetter 1988). Maybe this wait time strategy should be applied to note writing. Much of the communication between low achievers is hurriedly written before

the teacher snags it. There is no time to develop and pursue a topic, no time to practice the whole array of language functions, no time to write within the framework of rational human communication.

To enhance student concentration on the daily lesson, Marzano (1986) suggests "bracketing," or consciously putting aside some thoughts that might be important but not relevant to the task at hand. I believe such an activity would also create the time for students to write. Students certainly feel that their communication is important, but writing extraneous notes severely limits their attention to the lesson.

Marzano suggests that at the beginning of the class period, teachers ask students to write down those thoughts that need to be set aside. They should physically isolate that writing in a container (a candy jar, for example) to symbolize this bracketing. At the end

of the period, students should be encouraged to read what they have bracketed and develop strategies for dealing with the distracting problems.

Students already have a well-defined strategy for dealing with daily problems: they write notes. Teachers need only to explicitly teach that bracketing is a part of attention control and make time for it. This time allows for a form of prewriting and reflection that stolen moments do not include. Enabling students to add these two stages of the writing process to note writing may minimize distraction as well as broaden students' use of language functions.

Model Language Functions

As Atwell (1987) shows, middle school teachers can effectively use dialogue journals. I suggest using dialogue journals first with those who need it most, the social isolates. These



students may very well have been bypassed by all note-writing cliques despite teachers' best efforts at structuring their classrooms for cooperative learning. Next, ask the boys whose "macho" attitudes exclude them from the type of personalized practice essential to developing written competence to keep journals. All you need to do to identify this group is to ask. They'll tell you. One boy wrote:

I'm a boy! I don't have an opinion about notes. . . . Girls are the ones that write the notes in class. Since the invention of the teacher, girls have been writing about how Sally dumped Mike, and he deserved it. It's four days older than dirt!

Teachers, then, need to identify those students who are not in league with a note-writing discourse community and, through dialogue journals, model for them the language forms and functions necessary for growth.

Protect the Safety of Topics

Intercepting and reading students' notes doesn't stop the enterprise, but it might deter thoughtful topic development. Notes are written to "safe" audiences, friends who understand, who don't laugh at how the notes were written or trivialize the topic. The greater the risk of public revelation, the less significant the discourse topic becomes. But because middle school students need assurance, punishment does not deter the "crime." The trafficking continues; the groping toward more mature forms of written language ceases. If notes must be confiscated, don't read them. Throw them in the trash to signal that you have no intention of violating privacy.

Enhance Feelings of Success

Outlaw notes. Ban them altogether. Declare the writers derelict. Then practice selective vision.

Hannibal is attributed with saying, "No battle plan ever survives contact with the enemy," yet generals, like teachers, still make plans. This proposal for reverse psychology may crumble with the first skirmish, yet nothing motivates like success. Students connect success with getting away with something. One student wrote:

I do it all the time. Everyone does. People always will. I think it is important because when you do it, you have a strong sense of friendship—caring towards someone else. I do it so I can be with my friends while being apart. So I can "talk" to my friends without saying anything except, "Psst . . . Jill," or, so I can have the feeling of danger, like, "Uh oh! Here she comes! Don't want her to catch me!" Doing something you aren't supposed to be doing sometimes makes me do it more! That's how I am! It's not as fun when you're allowed to. It's funner when you are told, "Don't do that; you're not allowed!" You know what I mean? I'm sure you do. Yeah, in the long run I *do*, really, think note writing is important. I always get caught, but I keep on writing 'em. That must tell you something!

A Few Suggestions

Capitalizing on students' notes for a more effective writing program is not an add-on to a teacher's already full day. You need only see note writing in a positive light — as a vested interest of your students. Cooperative groups develop feelings of close ties. Teachers can separate the new friends so they must communicate in writing. You can introduce "bracketing" as part of your daily routine that presents students with the opportunity to write. Then you can show them how to use dialogue journals and leave the way clear for them to

act by not reading the notes you intercept. □

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