

Taking a Snapshot of Comprehension: Writing as an Informal Assessment Tool in Content Area Classrooms

Jill McGinley Yurko

Abstract

Comprehension of content-area reading material is a challenging task for students. How can teachers find a way to determine students' understanding of content in an already time-strapped environment? By incorporating writing into the classroom, teachers can quickly and efficiently ascertain students' comprehension of the content being taught. By implementing strategies such as quickwriting, learning logs, double-entry journals, and dialogue journals, teachers can take a quick snapshot of learning and use the informal assessment to guide instruction.

Reading expository material, such as content area textbooks, can be challenging for students. However, it is vitally important that students are able to comprehend what they read to fully understand the content area being studied. Comprehension can be defined as "the process of constructing a supportable understanding of a text" (Neufeld, 2005, p. 302). To fully understand a text, students must actively engage with reading. Both what the reader brings to the text through background knowledge and experience and the ideas conveyed through the printed word in the text play a role in comprehension. As teachers, we need to formally and informally assess comprehension of students. Every day in the classroom, we need to find ways to uncover students' understanding of material. Incorporating writing into all content-area classrooms is a quick and effective means to determine what students understand.

Writing can be a tool to draw connections and deepen learning. By incorporating writing into the content areas, teachers offer students the opportunity to recall, clarify, synthesize, and analyze. By sharing reflections about learning in a written form, teachers gain an assessment tool as they read written responses and ascertain comprehension of the material from these responses. Using a variety of writing opportunities in the classroom will paint a picture of reading comprehension for the teacher.

So, what types of writing can be employed in the content area classroom? Students can use writing tasks for two pur-

poses: "as a tool for learning and as a way to demonstrate their learning" (Tompkins, 2012, p. 272). Writing encourages deep exploration of material and offers the teacher evidence of what students have learned both from reading and instruction. The following types of writing tasks are effective in encouraging deep connections to content area material.

Quickwriting

Quickwrites are an informal means of assessing comprehension that can be accomplished in just a few minutes. Most often assigned at the beginning of class, quickwrites prompts "are generally teacher-directed questions and are fairly easy to work into a full curriculum" (Knipper & Duggan, 2006, p. 465). Since they require very little time and preparation by the teacher, implementation is simple. Following the writing time, the teacher simply prompts the class to discuss what they have written leading into the content of the day's lesson. As the discussion unfolds, students can add further information to their writing as they listen to the ideas of their classmates.

Entrance and exit slips used in the classroom are a form of quickwrites. Used at the beginning or end of class, "they are efficient ways to incorporate writing with minimal grading" (Lance & Lance, 2006, p. 18). One way to use an entrance slip to class would be to allow 3-5 minutes at the start of class for students to record a few facts or ideas they recall from the previous day's lesson. This is a very quick way to check comprehension before moving further into a chapter or unit, acting as an informal assessment tool to

inform instruction for the teacher. In Figure 1, a first grade student shares what she knows about caterpillars before beginning a lesson on the life cycle of a butterfly. The teacher opted to use the format of an outline of a caterpillar for the students' responses increasing the appeal of the activity for six year olds.

On the other hand, exit slips can be used "for students to summarize the important things they learned in class that day

or to make comments about things they found confusing" (Lance & Lance, 2006, p. 20). In just a few minutes, these writing activities provide a snapshot of learning and serve as a powerful resource for the content classroom teacher. An exit slip might ask students "What did you learn today?" or "How did you like working in small groups today?" They may even be set up in the form of a completion statement such as "The thing that surprised me most today was _____." Since exit slips are designed to elicit concise responses, the teacher will be able to read through them fairly quickly and then utilize the responses as a resource in



Figure 1

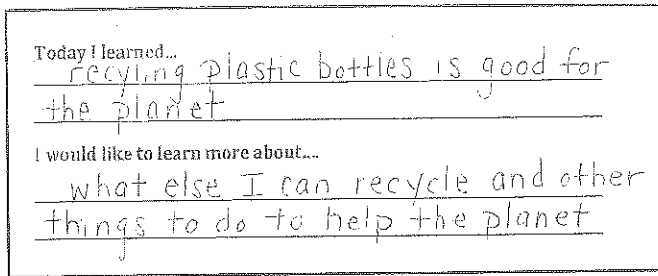


Figure 2

developing the next day's lesson. In Figure 2, a sixth grade student responds to the day's lesson about recycling and wonders what else he can do to help the environment.

Another option for a quickwrite is a writing break. To implement a writing break, at a specific point during class, students are asked to "stop and reflect in writing on the activities happening or the information being processed" (Daniels, Zemelman, & Steineke, 2007, p. 31). By taking these writing breaks, it allows students time to process information in smaller components rather than asking them to write at the end of class. Ultimately, by breaking the lesson into smaller segments, the retention of the materials may increase. Since this strategy is intended to just take a few minutes, a prepared prompt may facilitate the writing. For example, a teacher might ask, "What are you thinking about right now?" or "What piece of information really stands out to you and why?" This strategy can even be taken one step further by allowing students to briefly share their thoughts with each other. By doing this, students may hear ideas they had not considered and retention may be further increased.

Learning Logs

In a content area classroom such as science, students are required to take copious notes. But, do these notes translate into comprehension of material? Learning logs, also referred to as reading journals, connect facts learned in science class to real world experiences. They allow an avenue for recording exactly what students observed during an experiment or class activity, while also allowing them to react to their observations.

This connection of facts and critical thinking can happen in any content area classroom through learning logs. Students write entries to "discover gaps in their knowledge and to explore the relationship between big ideas" (Tompkins, 2012, p. 274). Students may also use a learning log or reading journal to respond to reading in social studies or language arts. Students are "encouraged to respond to what they have read and engage in affective learning" (Gammill, 2006, p. 756). Students become active learners as they engage with the material and draw personal connections.

Learning logs can be implemented at various stages of the instructional process. Certainly in asking students to use this strategy, time must be factored into the lesson for writing. Although not requiring a large amount of time, the lesson would be extended as students record thoughts and ideas about what they are learning. However, by using learning

logs as a tool to illustrate comprehension, students are offered the opportunity to interact with material at a range of points during the lesson. Learning logs can be utilized to activate prior knowledge, make predictions, offer solutions to problems, and draw connections to real-life situations.

Teachers could also use a learning log periodically or on a daily basis as a gauge to determine understanding at several points throughout a unit of study. Students might be asked at the end of class to reflect on what they have read and to answer a few questions about that reading in a learning log. Students may even work cooperatively at some point following reading to discuss the material and record a response in the learning log. In mathematics, teachers may "take the last five minutes of math class to summarize the day's lesson and have students respond in their math logs" (Tompkins, 2012, p. 275). In Figure 3, a third grade student demonstrates his knowledge of patterns by creating a pattern using numbers at the start of the log and explaining how he developed the pattern in words below it. By creating the pattern and explaining his thought process, he is making a deeper connection to his learning and the teacher sees evidence of comprehension. The preceding examples illustrate the flexibility of a learning log in the classroom. It can serve a variety of purposes and be used in a variety of formats.

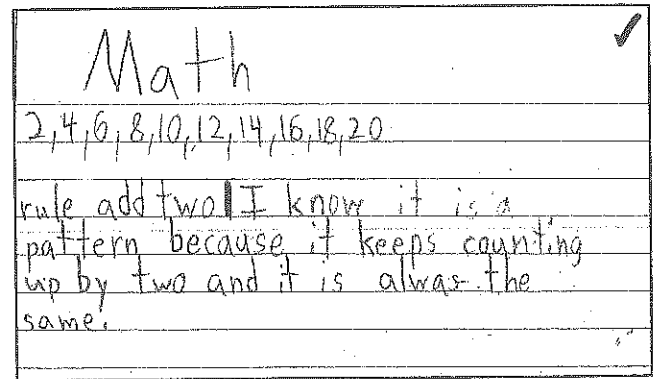


Figure 3

Double Entry Journals

Have you ever faced an important decision and made a plus-and-minus list to assist you in deciding? If the answer is yes, then you are already familiar with double entry journals and their potential power. Double entry journals are a writing tool teachers can use to evaluate student comprehension of reading material. This type of writing is useful in every content area and easily adapted to almost any reading situation.

For the format, students simply need a piece of paper so they can divide it into two columns. This format enables students to engage in two types of thinking by recording ideas side-by-side. These columns can be labeled according to the instructions of the teacher depending upon the information that is to be focused on for the lesson or unit. For example, in a literature unit, the teacher may ask students to record interesting quotations for the reading selection in the left column and a personal response to those quotations in the right column. In a science class, perhaps the teacher might ask students to use the left column to record key vocabulary

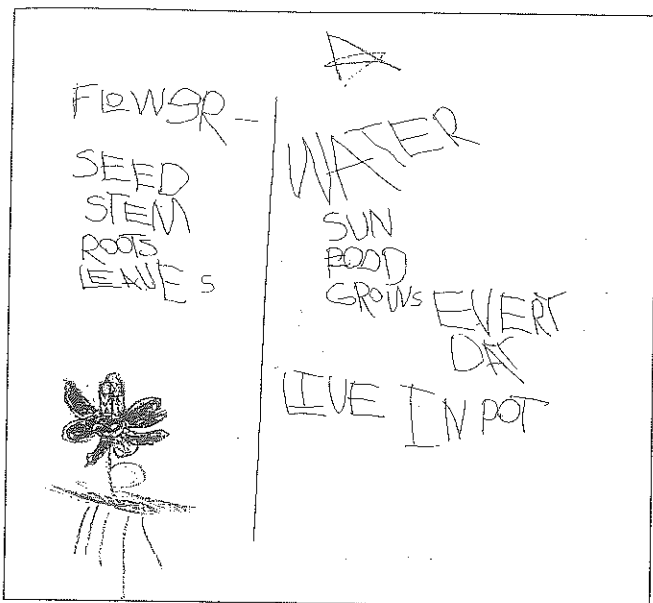


Figure 4

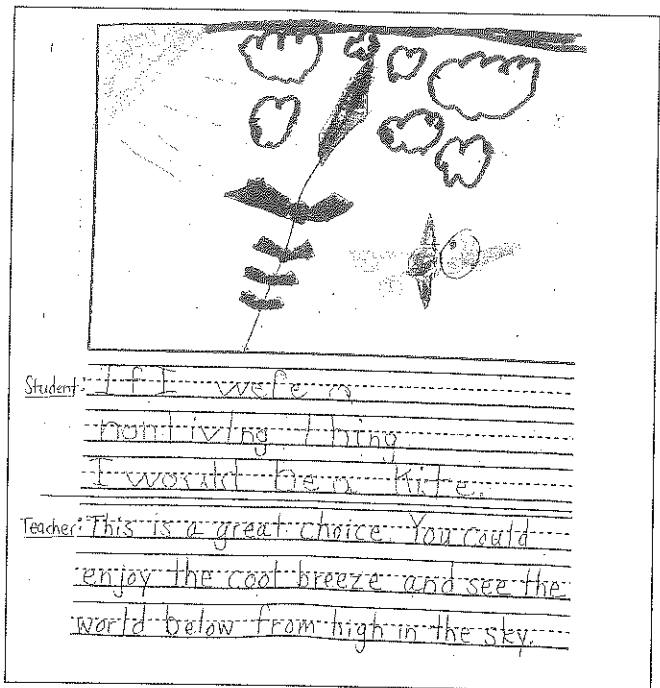


Figure 6

to the author's language" (Tompkins, 2012, p. 110). Students record textual information in the left column and more interpretive information in the right column illustrating understanding of the text. It engages them in a deeper level of thinking creating a picture of comprehension. Students may also share opinions, ideas, and concerns about the material. The power of such a writing activity is "more in the thought that the writer puts into it, rather than the final product" (Heuser, 2005, p. 46).

Dialogue Journals

A dialogue journal, grounded in Rosenblatt's (1938/1995) transactional theory or reader response, is a written conversation between the student and teacher. This informal conversation presents a unique opportunity. Students have the opportunity not only to interact with the material they are learning through writing, but also to engage in discussion with the teacher. Teachers know that sometimes students may be hesitant to raise their hand in class to ask a question; however, they may feel comfortable writing that question to the teacher in a dialogue journal. It becomes a meaningful activity to students as they realize that when the teacher reads what they have written, they have the teacher's undivided attention. In the example in Figure 5, a second grade student shares with the teacher not only what he has learned about the tundra in class, but also offers a personal connection to the animals being able to camouflage themselves in this environment. He links what he has learned in class to what he knows about the Armed Forces and hunting. As this dialogue continues from this point, the teacher is likely to learn new things about the student and the teacher-student relationship will strengthen.

Similarly in Figure 6, a first grade student writes in the dialogue journal what he would like to be if he could be a

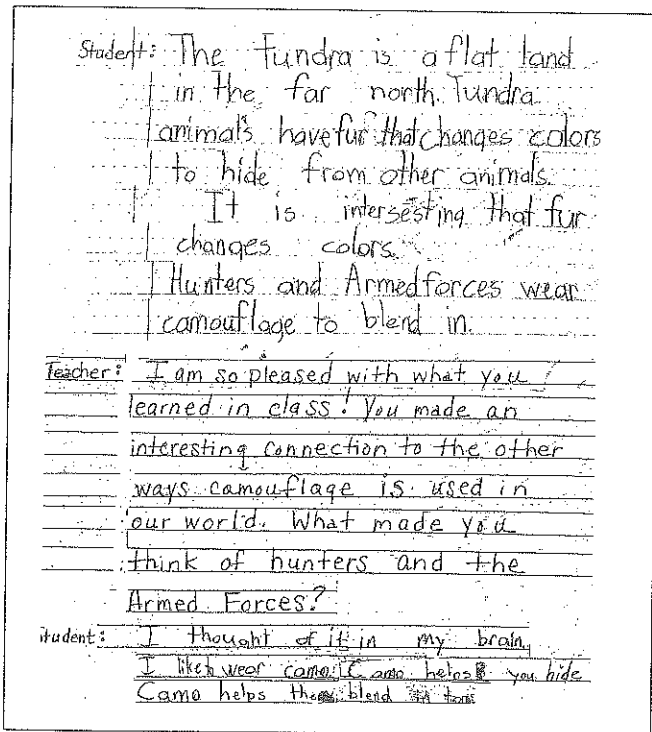


Figure 5

terms during reading and the right column to record personal definitions or questions about those terms. Other possible column headings might include computations and explanation of thinking for each step, opinion and proof, or observations and inferences. This recorded information can then act as a springboard for class discussion or as an informal assessment to determine a student's level of understanding of the reading. In Figure 4, a kindergartener shows what she has learned about the parts of a flower. In one column, she lists the parts and draws a picture; in the second column, she shares what she knows about what plants need to survive.

Through this type of writing, "children become more engaged in what they are reading and become more sensitive

non-living thing. A picture of a kite precedes his writing, illustrating his choice. This beginning entry, resulting from a question asked by the teacher, was completed during the reading of a chapter on living vs. non-living things and displays the student's understanding of the characteristics of non-living things.

These journals are intended to be "interactive and conversational in tone and, most importantly, they provide an opportunity for authentic writing and genuine communication" (Tompkins, 2012, p. 111). Having this one-on-one communication with students allows the teacher to understand what has been learned and also offers an opportunity to differentiate learning based on students' responses. By allowing students to tap into their background knowledge, a greater connection is encouraged with the content area material. In addition, teachers and students develop a personal bond through writing. Teachers learn more about students' lives and students feel that the teachers are invested in learning about who they are outside of class. This personal connection will likely foster a classroom community where students are engaged and invested in learning.

Implementation of this type of journaling is fairly easy. However, if used daily, each night the teacher would need to read and react to each student's entry, a daunting, and likely unrealistic, task. Therefore, perhaps the teacher might choose to collect dialogue journals on a rotating basis to ease the demand. Students could be assigned a day each week that their journal will be collected, meaning only a few journals need to be answered each night. This makes this task much more manageable and enjoyable for the teacher. Another possibility would be for the teacher to allow students to exchange dialogue journals and respond to each other. By allowing students to do this, they have the opportunity to not only react to each other's writing, but to read what other students have to say about what has been learned. Through exchanging journals, they may learn something new they had not considered or they may learn a classmate has similar interests, and new friendships may be created.

Used regularly, dialogue journals provide many positive outcomes. They enable teachers to observe common trends in responses and shape future instruction, while creating personal connections that promote a positive learning environment that benefits students and teachers.

Conclusion

What do my students already know? What have my students learned in class? These are questions continually posed by teachers. Assessment is a pivotal component of every classroom. As teachers, we look for a variety of ways to continually assess what and how students learn. Quickwrites, learning logs, double entry journals, and dialogue journals offer opportunities for students to demonstrate comprehension through writing. These strategies take a snapshot of student learning. The task of writing encourages students to be actively engaged in the learning process. It requires students to make connections between prior knowledge, personal experiences, and academic content. Ultimately, these strategies benefit both student and teacher. Students think critically about what they already know, what they have learned, and what they still need to know, while teachers are provided with evidence they can use in planning and implementation of instruction.

About the Author

Jill McGinley Yurko is assistant professor of education and director of the Graduate Program in Reading at King's College in Wilkes-Barre, PA. She can be reached at jil-yurko@kings.edu.

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