



Virginia Adult Education Research Network

Practitioner Research Briefs, 1998-1999 Report Series

When Learners Write about Work, Family, and Community

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Background:

As a literacy organization director and tutor for ten years, I have frequently been asked for advice about teaching strategies when our language experience activities do not seem to work. “Connect” seems to be the operative word. How do our students connect with their literacy training? How do the students connect with their work-a-day worlds? Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA) has had much success with the Language Experience Approach, in which the student dictates his own story and that story becomes the basis for his learning, because the activity reflects the student’s life. The story reflects the student’s interest and experience, and what could be closer to the student’s life than work, family and community? Through the Language Experience Approach, I thought we might find the connection that would help tutors construct a long-term learning plan and that would help the students persevere. What will we learn from these stories if the student is directed to dictate his life experience in these areas? Of additional interest to me is the tutor/student relationship. It has a comfort component that is essential to achievement. When the tutor becomes concerned about the effectiveness of teaching strategies, unease creeps in and that uneasiness

may be directly related to tutor attrition or burnout. Volunteers for the most part have no prior teaching experience and become anxious about their own capabilities.

Inquiry:

What happens when students write or dictate stories based on work, family and community?

Data Collection:

To begin the research I called nearly all of our 20 tutors and invited them to participate. Eight tutors and their students agreed. Students were asked to give permission to use their stories anonymously, and tutors were warned about the extra record keeping involved. All agreed. To track student attitude and level of acceptance, the tutors kept a journal in which they recorded their answers to the following: Is your student at ease in class? Is he or she prepared, having thought about the assignment?

I suggested nine prompts that each tutor could use to start the language experience process. The three prompts for work were: “Describe your dream job; Describe the worst work you ever had to do, not necessarily for money; Describe how someone else’s job helps you.” The three prompts for family were:

“Describe your favorite relative other than a parent; Explain the pluses and minuses of an extended family; Describe how adults can help children who are not their own.” And finally, the three prompts for community were: “What do you like about your hometown? What do you think it will be like here in twenty years? What businesses or industries should we have here?”

All the writings were collected and reviewed by three experienced teachers — a high school language arts teacher and teacher-mentor, a special education teacher, and a middle school teacher. Also, I reviewed the writings from my perspective as the intake person, having conducted the original interview, the assessment, and the tutor/student matches. As might be expected, not all the students participated fully so I did not get the numbers that I had hoped for. After reviewing all the writings, the four of us evaluated them using the guidelines for the GED essay. Using information from the intake procedure, I drew up a matrix adding the remarks from the student-tutor logs. Then I read the stories again with all the personal knowledge as background.

Findings:

Students who willingly, even eagerly, participated in the Language

Experience Stories previously became anxious about these new stories. Suddenly the Language Experience took on new hubris. Now we were writing “essays.” One student who regularly dictated 3,000 to 4,000-word stories about Native Americans and aliens from space was petrified. Tutors who confessed to being less than eager writers themselves were empathetic to their students’ anxieties. Also, over the eight weeks, students grew less eager. These were students who had been in the program for some time and were usually prepared for their sessions. Even those few tutors who regularly emphasized writing noticed that the stories became shorter and less thought-out despite the week between subject assignment and actual dictation. However, the more advanced students produced more samples.

Students normally open and gregarious were dismayed apparently by the formality in their participation in this project. On the other hand, the stories show quite clearly the personality and the life experience of the student. One student in particular revealed a sense of humor that had not been apparent in his earlier writings.

I expected to see a maturation process both in content and in skills.

Although the tutors would usually discuss the subject and then use the Language Experience stories to teach reading, spelling and other writing skills, expected improvements were not evident in any student. The mechanics of good writing need more than eight weeks to develop and so do observation skills. Participation in this project brought home a number of truths. Even eager students are intimidated by “writing.”

Conclusion:

Was our hope of making connections a failure? Building new knowledge on the foundation of old — the kind of connection described by Dr. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., of the University of Virginia — could be expanded. When reading is hard work, even the local weekly newspaper goes unread. When writing is more than a signature, writing is rarer than an endangered species.

Here in rural Virginia, our students rarely have the time, money or transportation to explore beyond their immediate environment. Can we help them keep up with technology in a world that has evolved from spoken communication — the telephone to written communication — to the Internet?

How can we as tutors prepare our students to access information? If we are preparing our students for meaningful employment and full participation in this wired world, we must concentrate on writing; building skill in spelling, grammar, punctuation and all the other elements of writing are needed to make communication work for both parties. We must intensify the process of teaching writing as a means of communication.

I have learned a great deal about how designing the question hones in on the core of the issue. The more specific the question, the more directed the data collection. We could continue working with the same students who are now more or less anaesthetized to their anxiety about writing. The tutor could then accompany the student along the highway leading to maturation in content and the mechanics of writing. Next time we shall place a great deal more importance on using computers and allowing the student to access the Internet. Becoming comfortable with technology will be invaluable in preparing students for the new millennium. □

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The Virginia Adult Education Research Network supports practitioner research as staff development. In practitioner research, groups of teachers, tutors, and administrators use qualitative inquiry methods to systematically explore issues or problems, arising from their own practice. Practitioner research is a long-term learning process that occurs, over the course of months, within a supportive group and continues as researchers carry out projects in their classrooms and programs. Through brief reports that they write practitioner researchers contribute their knowledge to others in the literacy education field. The complete series of Practitioner Research Briefs, 1998-1999, is available on the Internet at <http://www.vcu.edu/aelweb/vaern.html>

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