



Greater Good in Education
SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

DIALOGUE JOURNALS TO BUILD TRUST AND TO GROW STUDENTS' SEL SKILLS

"Dialogue starts from the courageous willingness to know and be known by others. It is the painstaking and persistent effort to remove all obstacles that obscure our common humanity."

—Daisaku Ikeda

OVERVIEW

Teachers and students write to each other in journals on a regular basis, helping to build positive teacher-student relationships and to grow students' self-awareness and social awareness.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To build student-teacher rapport at the beginning of the year
- To provide a "safe space" for students to communicate their opinions, needs, and fears about academic or personal issues
- To encourage an alternative form of communication when face-to-face conversations are more challenging for students -- for example, with introverted students or second language learners

TIME REQUIRED

- 15-30 minutes to introduce the journals
- Ongoing journal writing time varies (see "Instructions" section below)

LEVEL

- Lower Elementary
- Upper Elementary

MATERIALS

- One journal or notebook per student, for example spiral-bound or handwriting paper stapled between construction paper

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Explore their thoughts and emotions through writing about whatever academic or personal topic they wish

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management
- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

Think of a teacher who took the time to get to know you as a person. How did this teacher make you feel? Did you see yourself as a person or as a student differently as a result of this connection?

INSTRUCTIONS

INTRODUCING THE JOURNALS

- Discuss with students:
 - *Think of a time when you received a letter, email, or card from someone who cares about you. It could be a caregiver or a family member, like a grandfather or aunt, or maybe a friend. How did it feel to receive that note?*
- Tell students:
 - *I value each of you very much as both a student and as a person outside the classroom, so to help us get to know and understand each other better, each of you is going to receive a journal. You and I are going to be writing letters to each other. You can write to me about anything you like in this journal.*

- In pairs, small groups, or as a whole class, ask students to brainstorm possible topics for journal writing, such as academic subjects, classwork, recess, peer relationships, teachers, school activities, books, weekend and home activities, lunch, or self-reflection.
- Choose one of the topics and model the composing of a letter you might write to a student. For example:
 - *Dear _____(name of student): I really enjoyed what you said today in class about a particular character in a book. I could tell that you cared about this character, much like you care about other students in class. That's a great quality to have -- keep it up! I wonder how you might suggest to new students who join our class to care about each other? Sincerely, _____(your name)*
- Have students write a response to your sample letter in a small group or pairs. Ask a few groups/pairs to share their letter. If you have time, model again how you might respond to their letter.

GIVING STUDENTS THEIR JOURNALS

- Before handing out journals, give students the following guidelines [feel free to adjust these based on your students' abilities]:
 - Set a minimum length for letters. For example:
 - Younger students: three sentences and drawings are okay.
 - Older students: Letters must have the date, a greeting, at least five sentences, and a closing signature.
 - [Note that it can take two to three months for students to become fluent with the dialogue writing process.]
 - Let students know that you will not be grading their entries or correcting their spelling or grammar. [Teachers often model correct spelling and grammar in their responses to students.]
 - Clarify that the content of the journal is private -- only you and the student can read the letters, unless permission is given otherwise.
- Give each student a journal and let them decorate the front cover. If possible, have students leave their journals in a special space at school in order to maintain privacy.
- Set aside time during class for students to read your responses and write a reply.
 - Younger students: 10 minutes
 - Older students: 20 minutes

RESPONDING TO STUDENT'S LETTERS

- Because responding to students' letters can take a lot of time, researchers make the following suggestions:
 - Respond to students once a week.
 - Choose one pre-existing group or create a new one by drawing names from a hat. Work with that group for no less than three weeks.
 - If you teach multiple classes, choose one class to write to at a time.
 - Get creative and do what works for you! The most important part is responding to students on a regular basis.
- Suggestions for responding to content:
 - Acknowledge students' topics and encourage them to elaborate on their interests.
 - Add new, relevant information about the topics so your response is interesting to read; however, be careful not to over-respond.
 - Don't overwhelm students with emotions or advice.

- Use positive reinforcement.
- Avoid glib comments like “good idea” or “very interesting.” This cuts off rather than promotes dialogue.
- Take time to affirm and support each student.
- Respond to the content without correcting spelling and usage. Instead, model correct spelling and usage.

RESPONDING TO SENSITIVE TOPICS

- As the teacher-student relationship grows more trusting through the letters, students will be more likely to reveal their concerns--both academic and personal. ***Validating students’ emotions and experiences will not only help students feel safer and a greater sense of belonging in school, but will also help them to develop their self-awareness and social awareness--both key SEL skills.***
- Note that unless legally required to do so, you have the option to consult with the school counselor or psychologist without sharing the actual journal entry or the student’s name if an especially difficult situation arises.
- Psychologist [Dr. Mary Lynn Crow](#) makes the following suggestions for how to respond to sensitive material:
 - *Help students identify their feelings by clarifying or by providing helpful terminology.*
 - “The stomach ache and tight throat sound to me like you felt scared. When we’re afraid, sometimes we can really feel it in our stomach, our chest, or in our throats. Are you feeling afraid because your mom spends so much time with your new little brother? It’s okay to feel angry; it’s just not okay to hit your little brother.”
 - *Accept and validate students’ feelings; be empathetic.*
 - “It must hurt you a lot to have to listen to them argue.”
 - *Provide a link to normalcy and reality in situations when students don’t recognize their own vulnerability.*
 - “Being treated in that way is wrong; you don’t have to allow it to happen anymore. I can get you some help.”
 - *Self-disclose when appropriate.*
 - “I used to have a best friend, too, and I remember how lonely I felt when she moved away.”
 - *Encourage productive self-exploration.* Encouraging students to know themselves better helps them to move toward a greater sense of independence and self-sufficiency.
 - “Maybe you can tell me more about that next time.”
 - *Encourage problem-solving.* Post steps in the classroom: 1. Identify the problem; 2. List possible solutions; 3. Forecast consequences of possible solutions; 4. Pick the best solution; 5. Make action plans; 6. Just do it!
 - “What are some other things you could do when that happens?”
 - *Use bibliotherapy,* or using children’s literature to help students identify with others who have similar problems. The decision to read is left to the student. Know that the decision to read will not resolve problems.
 - “I have a book about another boy whose grandfather dies. It reminds me of what you’re going through. I can get it for you Monday, if you’d like.”
 - *Identify and support the use of helpful people resources.* School counselors, nurses, principals, and others -- the choice is left up to the student.

- “Would you like to talk to Mrs. Garcia about your concerns for your sister?”
- *Communicate that the student is not alone.*
 - “Lots of people your age feel that way, Ellen.”
- *If it could help, suggest a private face-to-face discussion.*
 - “I’d like to talk to you some more about this in person. How about today after school?”
 - “It took a lot of courage for you to tell me about that. How can I help? Please let me know.”
- *Validate the students’ personhood, as opposed to focusing exclusively on the behavior.*
 - “It’s so nice to get this chance to know you better.”

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Do you find that your relationships with students are improving after using the journals a few times? How?
- As time passes, do students demonstrate more self-awareness in their writing?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

Several studies suggest that dialogue journals between teachers and students can help with [classroom management](#), [building rapport with students](#), and growing [students’ self-esteem](#) and [problem-solving abilities](#).

Academically, dialogue journals may increase students’ motivation to write and also provide a space for students who may not be comfortable expressing themselves in class. For example, second language learners, newly arrived immigrants, and more introverted students may be more likely to share their questions about academic content.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Numerous studies show that the relationship between teachers and students is critical to both academic achievement and student well-being, yet building a trusting relationship with students can be difficult for numerous reasons. Demands placed on teachers and challenging student behavior are just two kinds of roadblocks. Dialogue journals offer both teachers and students a safe mechanism to get to know each other and build mutual regard.

In addition, dialogue journals may offer an alternate way for students to [increase their self-awareness](#) by allowing them to [express and explore their emotions](#) through writing. In addition, building a collaborative relationship with teachers may also improve students’ social awareness.