

Thinking Out Loud on Paper

The Student Daybook as a Tool to Foster Learning



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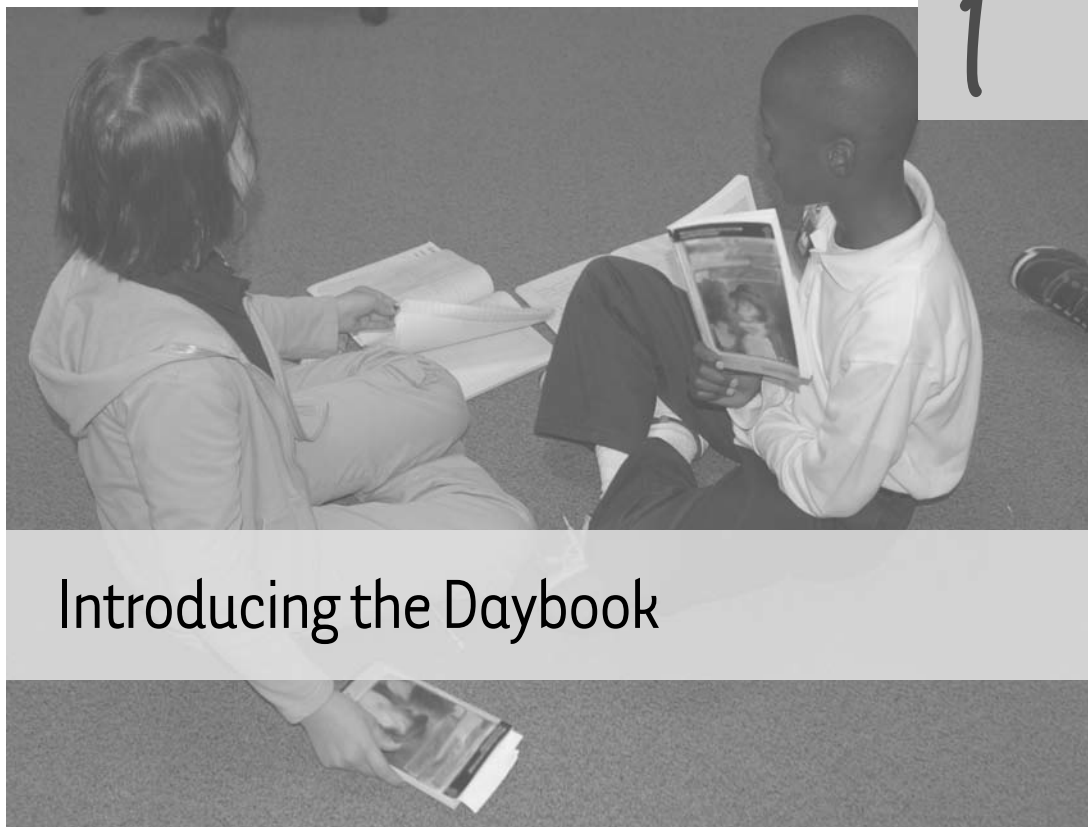
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Introducing the Daybook

It is not a bad idea to get in the habit of writing down one's thoughts. It saves one having to bother anyone else with them.

—ISABEL COLEGATE

The daybook is a tool that we use in our daily lives with our students, as teacher researchers, as writers. It's the tool we use to muse over and investigate whatever is going on. It's a tool we use to learn and discover with our students.

As teachers, our goal is to empower our students and provide them with ways of learning that work best for them. Daybooks have helped us foster ways of learning that allow students the space and freedom to be silly and messy, to be thinkers and writers just for the sake of thinking and writing, to be miners of their thoughts even if just to dig out a golden line from something that they read.

The results are clear—we find that our students are successful in class, are prepared for tests or the next grade level, and, more importantly, are empowered by the joy of thinking and learning. Questions such as “why do I have to do this” are replaced by “listen to what I just wrote in my daybook.” When this happens, we know we’ve done our job.

This book is not one of those programs that “come from the mountain top” that make you wonder, “how long is this gimmick going to last?” And it’s not a book about writer’s notebooks or how to organize your teaching life. This is a book about a tool for lifelong learning: the daybook. The daybook is different from a writer’s notebook because it collects more than what might be used in a writing workshop, though you can use it there if you like. The daybook breaks down the typical disconnect that occurs in schools: disconnects between theory and practice, between one grade and the next, between one subject and another, and between the way people really learn and how we often feel obligated to make our students learn in very specific and predetermined ways.

Why Call It a Daybook?

Jim Burke (2007) has something he calls a daybook, which is his method of getting organized. We see Jim’s daybook as a helpful tool that helps us plan instruction in a logical way, in much the same way as we like to keep our desks neat and tidy. Though we do use daybook planners to reflect on and plan instruction, our view of daybooks is more like our closets than our desks—a place where we store things, throw things into when friends are coming over, stuff with the junk of our daily lives, and, every now and then, clean out in order to find something worth presenting to someone else. Daybooks for us are thinking tools. As teachers we use them throughout our day to reflect and to research, and we ask our students to use them in our classrooms to research and think about their worlds.

The daybook, as we understand it, has a long history. Back in the fifth century BC, Protagoras, a sophist, kept records of important arguments and key concepts that were otherwise only preserved in memory. These records were called “commonplace books,” and they were used from the classical period through the nineteenth century as a valuable tool for educating young minds. *Commonplacing* required students to enter important passages from literature and at times comment on those passages. In the seventeenth century, these books were known as *silva rerum* (“a forest of things”). These forests held beautiful passages and important arguments that could be called upon to apply to many different situations. People were considered truly knowledgeable if they could remember

and quote important passages from their commonplace book (Knoblauch and Brannon 1984).

More directly, we take the term *daybook* from Donald Murray, who kept a daybook throughout his writing. In 1986, he gave this advice to scholars in rhetoric and composition:

Keep a planning notebook with you to play in at the office, at home, in the car, or the airplane, at faculty meetings (especially at faculty meetings), while you're watching television, sitting in a parking lot or eating a lonely lunch. . . . The notebook, which I call a daybook, will make it possible for you to use fragments of time, and fragments of time are all that most of us really have. Fifteen minutes, ten, five, two, one, less. In this book you can make lists, notes, diagrams, collect the quotes and citations, paste in key articles and reference, sketch outlines, draft titles, leads, endings, key paragraphs that will make it possible for you to be ready to write when you have an hour, or two, or three clear. (148)

Our daybooks draw from this rich history; we ask students to use them to write about their lives, to keep track of their thinking, and to notice all the world around them with open eyes and ears and hearts. In our daybooks, there's all kinds of writing that just doesn't fit anywhere else: bumper sticker slogans that got us laughing when we were waiting at a stoplight (one Lil saw last week was, "Huked on Foniks reely worked fur me"); pieces of language that moved us (one golden line that Cindy loved is, "We grow into new selves with every sentence we write, with every choice we make among the almost endless set of possibilities for their construction. To fail in that articulation is to foreclose on our identities, to cut short the process of discovering ourselves in thought" [Imbrie 1999]). Daybooks have become a valuable tool in our classrooms—we want to share that learning and excitement with you.

What Grade Levels Are Daybooks Right For?

Each of us has taught either elementary school, middle school, high school, or college, and some of us have taught a combination of all the above. (Lil, Sally, and Cindy have taught middle, high school, and college students; Karen has taught elementary, middle, high school, and college students; Tony has taught elementary and college students; Shana has taught high school and college students.) When we taught in college for the first time, we all had almost the exact same experience. While we were home in the quiet of our studies, as the first day approached, we thought, "What am I doing?" We became so nervous at the prospect

of teaching nineteen-year-olds that we stayed awake all night. Finally, at about two in the morning, we had an idea. If we could just write down what we would do for the first two weeks of class, we knew we would be well on our way. The plans we all wrote looked very much like what we had written for our elementary, middle, or high school students. The plans were driven by a common goal of helping our students realize that they are writers. No matter the age or grade level of our students now, the way we approach writing instruction in our classrooms from the first day is by having students think, write, and reflect. All of this thinking, writing, and reflecting is captured in our daybooks.

From this shared experience, we knew that the ways we teach writing, from fourth grade to college composition, were not that different. We knew as teachers that all of our students are writers, and their needs are very similar. Whether in the college or the seventh-grade classroom we had students who hated to write and students who had filled a couple dozen journals. In fourth grade or twelfth, we all had students who needed us a lot and students we would not get to know at all. In our sixth-grade classroom we had students whose thoughts were as deep as any high school student we had taught. And in our college classes we had some interesting “middle-grades thinkers.” So we have found ideas from across the spectrum of grades helpful in meeting the needs for all the learners in our classes. With a bit of tweaking, what works for college students can and does also work for elementary children.

Cindy will tell you that she has learned more about teaching reading and writing for high school students from Karen’s and Tony’s elementary classrooms than anywhere else. Shana says maybe it’s because teachers of older children assume too much about what kids already know. Cindy used to think it was because elementary teachers weren’t as pressured by content, but Tony and Karen have shown her that their pressures are just as heavy, not to mention they’ve got all subject areas to deal with.

Karen and Tony will tell you they learn a lot by hanging out with middle, secondary, and college teachers. They like to talk theory and find the validation and the sources that support their teaching practices. Karen and Tony always take any high school or college classroom idea and instantly transform it to what will work with their school children. They always say, “My kids can do that!” Conversely, they like seeing how what they are doing with second or fourth graders is adapted by teachers of upper grades.

We develop as teachers by learning from each other. We invite you to join us by reading this book in whatever way works best for you. One strategy is to read straight through to the end, which is the best way to take in the wide range of our teaching experiences, grade levels, and the theory our practices are based on.