I like [dialogue] journals because the teacher gets to know about me, things I would usually keep from teachers. . . . the teacher doesn’t tell us what to write about . . . we could write about other stuff, things that aren’t about school, things that she hasn’t taught us. . . . I feel like I am teaching her things about me. When I get a letter back from the teacher, I feel like she has read my letter and that feels good.

Miriam (pseudonym), 10 years old

Despite being a well-established instructional technique, dialogue journaling has fallen in and out of popular attention over the years. In the 1980s and 1990s, as whole language approaches gained currency, many educators heralded dialogue journals’ potential for developing students’ comfort and expressiveness as writers, as well as for enhancing their knowledge about themselves and the world (e.g., Bode, 1989; Kreeft, 1984; Staton, Shuy, Peyton, & Reed, 1988). Many also lauded dialogue journals’ potential to support language development among English Learners (ELs), specifically because of the opportunities they present for low-risk, student-centered, individually scaffolded writing (e.g., Balder-Salcedo, 2009; Nassaji & Cumming, 2000; Peyton & Seyoum, 1989; Reid, 1997; Reyes, 1991). With the advent of standards-based reforms and structured writing workshop approaches in the 1990s, and back-to-basics, scripted literacy instruction post-NCLB, pedagogies of transmission and standardization, rather than dialogue and differentiation, have gained prominence. This shift, we fear, undermines the kind of relationship building and reciprocal learning—highlighted in Miriam’s quote above—that stands to benefit all students, and ELs especially.

From a Freirean perspective, dialogue represents the core of authentic education, and humility and open-mindedness are among its cornerstones. In dialogue, Freire (1970) writes, “there are neither utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages”; there are only humans “attempting, together, to learn more than they now know” (p. 90). Done well, dialogue journals enable humanizing encounters to which all participants contribute resources for learning and from which all participants learn. Keeping this in mind, we analyzed a set of dialogue journals produced with ELs in one of our own classrooms. Specifically, we asked: What power do dialogue journals hold for generating the kind of reciprocal engagement that informs and enriches student and teacher learning?

We then anchored our analysis using two core concepts: 1) authenticity, which involves grounding relationships in an ethic of care (Noddings, 1984; Valenzuela, 1999) and enacting literacy practices that are “purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices” (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 7; CREDE, 2002); and 2) humanizing teaching, which requires that teachers strive to see, listen to, learn from, and mentor students as social and cultural beings with proud histories and deep knowledge (Bartolomé, 1994; Freire, 1970).

What Are Dialogue Journals?
Contrary to most in-school writing, dialogue journal entries do not arise in response to prompts. Rather, they arise out of and foment relationships; they are spaces where students write about what they care about and know, and where teachers and peers serve as communication partners. Thus, rather than focusing on correcting students’ written
language, dialogue journals emphasize authentic communication.

In primary grades, students and teachers might write to one another daily, perhaps in small groups, where students address self-selected topics and then read their writing aloud to the teacher. In turn, the teacher can tailor her responses, starting where each child is and “leading from behind” (Gibbons, 2002, p. 47). This might involve engaging in oral conversation about an entry and writing one question to which a child can respond, or it might involve offering only a written response. Children, too, can respond in individualized ways. Whereas one child might be ready to write a full response, another might need to focus on one “target” word (e.g., derived by the teacher from the child’s verbal response; see Fig. 1).

Dialogue journals in the intermediate and secondary grades also allow for individualization. Because older students tend to write more involved entries, a teacher might spend 30 minutes of weekly instruction having students read the teacher’s response and write new entries to which the teacher would write responses before the next in-class journaling session. In addition to responding to the content of students’ entries, teachers might model conventions with which students are struggling. As in primary grades, this process helps students see that their journals have a two-fold purpose: to provide an opportunity for communication and to serve as a strategy for becoming more competent writers. Such journals can support complex understandings of competency, particularly when they serve as spaces for introducing, negotiating, and appropriating the codes of “standard” writing and for recognizing, honoring, and leveraging the literacies—many “nonstandard,” in academic terms—that students bring to school.

Nevertheless, dialogue journaling poses challenges, and even well-intentioned teachers risk compromising students’ potential to exercise agency, communicate authentically, and develop as writers through journaling. Indeed, in teacher–student dialogue, teachers always hold significant power—power that can be misused or abused. Thus, teachers must grant students the freedom to share only what they’re comfortable sharing, and without threat of retributions. Like doctors, psychologists, and social workers, teachers must abide by professional ethics, which include maintaining students’ confidentiality whenever possible. (We discuss issues of confidentiality more fully later in the article.)

In addition, teachers run the risk of succumbing to various pressures, including the pressure to privilege mechanics over meaning, which can undercut journals’ authenticity and relationship-building power. Pressed for time, teachers might offer cursory or formulaic responses, which likewise threaten the integrity of the dialogue and, especially, students’ willingness to risk-take in writing. As Staton (1987) explains,

We reply to questions; we respond to persons. A brief reply to a student’s text is not a response to that student. A response involves an implicit commitment of self, an engagement with the other. (p. 47)
Such commitment and engagement is a precondition for maximizing student and teacher learning through journaling. Indeed, to journal in this manner, teachers must believe that students bring valuable insights—fodder for rich, worthwhile dialogue.

Thus anchored, dialogue journaling offers a means by which to disrupt traditional power structures and improve academic outcomes among marginalized students. Numerous scholars connect enduring educational inequities to coercive power relations within schools and society (e.g., Bartolomé, 1994; Valenzuela, 1999). They argue that collaborative power relations—which emerge when teachers employ “reciprocal-interactive” approaches (Cummins, 1986)—can lower students’ affective filters (Krashen, 1982). Collaborative power relations can empower students to assume academic identities, draw on their full linguistic repertoires, achieve at higher levels, and develop bilingualism and biliteracy (Mi-Song, 2010; Moll & Dworin, 1996; Moll, Saéz, & Dworin, 2001; Reid, 1997; Staton, 1987). Thus, as one of many reciprocal-interactive approaches, dialogue journaling can create space for students to express themselves and approximate linguistic conventions (e.g., spelling, grammar, idiom, etc.). Meanwhile, they offer opportunities for teachers to forge relationships with students as communication partners and, as appropriate, to model and otherwise support their acquisition of traditional skills and codes (e.g., Balder-Salcedo, 2009). In these and other ways shown below, dialogue journals can serve as vehicles for students’ literacy development and for authentic teacher learning, too.

**What We Did and Learned**

To investigate the power and promise of dialogue journaling, we selected journal entries produced by a group of ELs and Jamy Stillman when she was an English-Spanish bilingual teacher at a public...
elementary school in California. Thus, all entries reflect written exchanges between Jamy and her fourth- and fifth-grade students (student names are pseudonyms), most of whom were native Spanish speakers and the children of migrant farmworkers. Given her school’s commitment to bilingual education and cultural responsiveness, Jamy received administrative support to develop interdisciplinary, student-centered, and literacy-rich curricula; however, she was also expected to use district-mandated materials, albeit in ways that reflected student interests and needs. As a result, Jamy was able to incorporate a variety of literacy instructional strategies (e.g., writers workshop, readers workshop, literature circles) into her social studies and science units, which were typically organized around multicultural and social justice themes. Dialogue journals represented a key element of Jamy’s literacy program and, as we show, supported Jamy’s efforts to authentically link content and skill instruction to students’ lives.

The idea to conduct this study emerged during a conversation between two of the authors, Jamy and Lauren, about preparing teachers to serve ELs. Jamy shared with Lauren several dialogue journals from her own classroom, and ultimately, Lauren co-conceptualized the inquiry and engaged as an analysis and writing partner. The third author, Kathryn, contributed to analysis, too, which involved coding entries with a focus on the opportunities for learning that the journals presented. We three then shared our coding with one another, wrote memos, and developed assertions based on common themes.

In this article, we offer several findings from our analysis—namely that dialogue journaling with ELs allowed us to:

- offer opportunities for teaching and learning about everyday lives;
- build a more inclusive, responsive classroom community and curriculum;
- assess student writing and provide space for students to reflect and self-assess;
- try out different voices for different purposes and audiences.

In addition, we comment upon Jamy’s responses to students’ entries, providing some insight into how dialogue journaling might be strengthened through thoughtful and intentional teacher engagement.

**Opportunities to Teach and Learn about Everyday Lives**

Perhaps the most prominent theme that emerged through analysis was the role of journaling in supporting the development of authentic, humanizing relationships among Jamy and her students. As subsequent examples illustrate, journaling supported both parties in teaching and learning from one another and nurtured students’ desire to be seen for who they are.

Not surprisingly, many students chose, in the absence of formal prompts, to dialogue about their families and home lives. Eduardo, for example, wrote about how his mom could not chaperone class fieldtrips “because she is working alot etset we I am sick she stait at home because she takes care about me.” In doing so, he provided Jamy an opportunity to quell his concerns and honor his mother’s hard work and care: “Don’t worry, Eduardo! I understand that your mom has to work a lot, except when you’re sick. . . . It’s wonderful that she stayed at home to take care of you. . . . She loves you very much!”

Over multiple entries, Jacob also shared details from his home life: how he helped around the house, how the doctor prescribed a special diet for his pregnant mother, how one parent’s house provided respite when his other parent was struggling. Oscar, meanwhile, often wrote about his father: how he sat with Oscar in the hospital when they thought Oscar had appendicitis, took Oscar to baseball tryouts, and planned weekend camping trips.

Choosing parents as subjects of their writing, Eduardo, Jacob, and Oscar made evident the importance of these relationships in their lives. By doing so, students pushed Jamy to see parents as contributing to family life in ways that the school context—especially given dominant narratives about fathers’ contributions (or lack thereof) to parenting young children—might not have primed her to consider. Thus, through journaling, students informed Jamy
about their lives and challenged her to see more and think more deeply about how family members serve children and how the curriculum reflects and honors those contributions.

Responding to students, Jamy wrote about her own household responsibilities (e.g., “Keeping the house clean is hard work. Sometimes I spend almost my whole weekend cleaning!”), her father (e.g., “Some of my favorite memories are of going places with just my dad.”), and her dog, who, Jamy explained, “sat next to me all day long and kept me company” after she had knee surgery. Oscar subsequently seized the opportunity to write about his dog, which led to a multiple-week exchange about the love and sense of security pets bring. Here, too, journaling pushed Jamy toward holistic, nuanced understandings, such as providing a more contextualized account of what it means to care for and be cared for by pets than would a typical writing prompt (e.g., “What’s your favorite pet and why?”).

Another regular journal topic was students’ participation in the kinds of activities typically associated with community cultural practice (e.g., church services, weddings, quinceañeras, first communions). Given Jamy’s Jewish background and students’ unfamiliarity with Judaism, journals provided a forum for learning about similarities and differences in each other’s traditions. In one exchange, for example, Maria and Jamy dialogued about the Catholic tradition of assigning individuals a Saint’s Day; at the same time, Jamy modeled spelling, grammar, and structure conventions in context (see Fig. 2).

Not surprisingly, given the supportive space such journals offer, students frequently wrote about parts of their lives that scared, saddened, or angered them. Like Jacob, who wrote about navigating between two homes, many students revealed challenges at home. Some shared concerns about siblings whose behavior troubled them. Others confided about arguments among family members and fears that families might separate. In response to Jamy’s writing about missing her mom on Mother’s Day, for example, Sonia wrote about her brother’s military service. This, in turn, presented an opportunity for Jamy to support Sonia in processing her emotions and developing a sense of agency about responding (see Fig. 3).

Dialogue journals offered Jamy windows into students’ social ties and peer tensions, too. As in Eduardo’s entry (see Fig. 4), students frequently wrote about conflicts with one another. By sharing feelings of remorse, Eduardo invited the counsel of Jamy, who could then affirm his feelings and his efforts to repair relationships and regain trust.

Some students also wrote about struggles with peers or school-based adults or shared excitement about making new friends. Such exchanges helped Jamy understand the classroom and school climate as experienced by students and helped her provide more targeted supports for healthy development. Important unto itself, the provision of such support can enhance students’ sense of social and emotional security, both of which are crucial to improving their academic self-concept, engagement, and performance (Valenzuela, 1999).

Notably, while the exchanges described here demonstrate Jamy’s
recognition of students’ prior knowledge, her desire to learn from students through questioning and her efforts to support students in processing their lived experiences and emotions also offer valuable opportunities for reflection. In Figure 2, for example, Jamy’s response helps illustrate the importance of teachers recognizing their power in teacher–student dialogue, particularly when addressing sensitive topics such as religion. Specifically, Jamy’s response frames the discussion in terms of “difference” and avoids promoting any one religion—an important cautionary move given the potential for teachers’ comments about their own religious backgrounds to hold sway over students, even unintentionally.

That said, while Jamy’s questions (“...will you have a Saint’s Day too? When is it?”) conveyed her interest in Maria’s chosen topic, her desire to “protect” Maria may have prevented her from asking questions that could carry Maria’s topic forward with more depth. Emphasizing excitement about learning from Maria, posing substantive questions—for example, about what “Santos” day celebrations typically involve—and encouraging Maria to engage others around this topic all might have deepened the authenticity of the exchange.

Similarly, in her responses to Sonia (Fig. 3) and Eduardo (Fig. 4), revised and expanded questioning—including less leading and more open-ended questions—might have elicited additional information and communicated more effectively Jamy’s supportive stance. For example, “Are you sure . . .?” questions, such as those in Figure 3, run the risk of being read as challenging the veracity of student claims and compromising the trust on which dialogue relies. Likewise, quick topic switches—like Jamy’s shift from writing about "making good choices" to asking about Eduardo’s vacation plans (Fig. 4)—may close off topics that students want to engage around further. Indeed, it might be particularly important in emotionally charged exchanges to invite students to continue engaging around the topic while also offering an opportunity to shift focus.

Likely due to students’ well-developed relationships with Jamy, subsequent exchanges indicate that Sonia read Jamy’s question as supportive and that Eduardo felt comfortable re-engaging the same
topic and also introducing others of his own. Nevertheless, the potential for miscommunication is always present, which underscores the importance of nurturing authentic relationships and taking care with one’s words.

Building an Inclusive, Responsive Classroom Community and Curriculum

In addition to providing opportunities for authentic exchanges in journals, student entries provided insights that Jamy could leverage to increase the curriculum’s relevance and rigor for individual students. For example, once it became clear through journaling that Luis, who was struggling academically and socially, had deep interests in plants and knew much about them from his mother, Jamy could construct opportunities for Luis to take leadership roles in related science units. Likewise, only after Juan, a reluctant writer who loved art, wrote briefly but enthusiastically about his cousin’s wedding, could Jamy suggest he use writers workshop to craft an elaborated account. Recognizing Juan’s artistry, Jamy also wrote: “I can just imagine the drawings you would create to accompany this story!” Figure 5 shows excerpts of the book Juan then authored.

By design, journal content—about parents’ contributions, the responsibilities and rewards of pet ownership, the wisdom of community members, and so on—often found its way from journal pages into the classroom curriculum, where it served as an axis around which “sanctioned” school knowledge could be organized. Not only did students’ entries prompt Jamy to adapt curricula to better reflect students’ interests and experiences, they also helped make evident students’ funds of knowledge of which she was previously unaware. This growing awareness prompted her to incorporate into the curriculum additional opportunities to learn with and from students’ families.

Upon learning about Luis’s knowledge and interest in plants, for example, Jamy reached out to parents to see who might be interested in participating in a science unit on plant life. She and the students consequently learned from parents how to construct garden boxes, how to collect seeds at the growing season’s end, about health risks of pesticide use, and about working conditions in the fields. Jamy also began sending home interactive assignments designed to bridge family funds of knowledge and thematic social studies units on the Constitution, immigration, and civil rights. These assignments invited students to reflect with their families about the Declaration of Independence’s statement that “all men are created equal”; to interview family and community members about the challenges and triumphs of immigration; and to talk with family members about how they define civil rights. Connecting instruction to students’ lives represents an essential component of responsive teaching (e.g., Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995)—one that hinged upon Jamy’s efforts to learn about students.

And yet, more than just prompting students to share from their own lives, dialogue journaling also built students’ confidence, initiative, and
sense of power in the classroom. Students’ entries often included their reflections on parts of the curriculum that inspired them and with which they sought to connect. For example, Maria shared, unprompted, her desire to “edit my story in writers workshop” after “learning a lot” from a Literature Studies text. Oscar, too, expressed enthusiasm for specific parts of the school experience and what they afforded him as a learner: “Science camp was great for me because I got to be with nature. I never knew there were so many things to explore. . . . I wish we could stay longer to learn more.” Oscar also drew connections between literature and writing; for example, he began journaling about his dog as his Fire Mate—a term used by a book’s author to signal one character’s most precious relationship (Cossi, 1977)—and inquired as to whether Jamy considered her dog her Fire Mate, too.

Even something as simple as having the chance to ask their teacher to share from her life helped blur teacher/learner distinctions and disrupt traditional power dynamics. Here are just a few questions that students posed in their entries. Similar to other examples, we’ve left these questions as students wrote them in order to illustrate students’ comfort with approximating spelling in the context of authentic communication:

- Do your dad and your mom fight? If they do don’t you hear them?
- How did you feel when you were at the hospital with your dog why?
- Teacher were you late at your cousin’s wedding? What’s your cousin’s name?
- I want to ask you ¿How did it fill to be in the snow?

In each instance, Jamy strove to respond with sincerity and specifics, aiming to demonstrate that she read carefully, appreciated, and took seriously students’ questions. For example, when asked if her parents fight, Jamy answered honestly, sharing that her parents sometimes argued and—though she knew it was “hard for grown ups to get along sometimes”—hearing them fight made her “feel anxious inside.”

Providing Opportunities for Students to Reflect and Self-Assess

As mentioned, dialogue journals can serve as low-risk contexts for ELs to develop language and literacy in their first and new languages (Reid, 1997; Reyes, 1991). Our analysis also revealed students’ tendencies to reflect on their own language and literacy development, including the relationship between their native language use/proficiency and English language acquisition. For instance, students commonly revealed their thinking about their progress and feelings of apprehension or readiness to tackle new language-related challenges. Many wrote about the frustrations of language acquisition—that it was harder to write in English than Spanish, or that their English wasn’t progressing as quickly as they hoped. Some negotiated and even suggested preferences regarding which aspects of the instructional program they felt comfortable engaging with in English versus Spanish.

In his journal, for example, Jesus often expressed hesitation about writing in English. However, after receiving praise from Jamy about his progress (e.g., “You are becoming a bilingual expert. How exciting!”), he began voicing newfound pride and willingness to take on challenges: “I’m happy to that I’m learning how to read in English, and I wish that I can read more in English.” In response, Jamy invited Jesus to negotiate when and where in the curriculum he might begin reading in English: “I’m glad you want to start reading in English. It’s great that you checked a new English book out of the library to start! Maybe you can read in English the next time we do Literature Studies. (I mean when we pick new books.) What do you think?” Jesus’s reply gave voice to his hopes for himself, as well as the counsel of a parent, who shared in nurturing his hopes: “I’m so happy that I’m learning to read write in English I wish that I can learn more. Som day I want too go to the university. I want to get a career, a job and a girlfriend but not now because I’m too small to have a girlfriend at this age sais my dad.”

Similarly, after writing with Jamy in Spanish for several months, Adele voiced her decision...
to begin writing in English: “My mom thik’s that I ned to start to write more in English. And I think that I sud write in English to.” In response, Jamy let Adele know that she supported her and reminded Adele of their agreement for Jamy to underline—only in Jamy’s own entries—words with which Adele struggled. Jamy also encouraged Adele to decide which language she would write in and when, as well as decide whether she wanted Jamy to continue underlining in English as she had in their Spanish exchanges.

Maria, who had also been journaling in Spanish, but conversing with Jamy in English, also expressed her plan to begin journaling in English and, in addition, identified her uncle as a supportive resource. Jamy affirmed Maria’s plan, and reminded her to tap her own knowledge and expertise as well. Maria responded in English, appropriating much of the language modeled by Jamy (see Fig. 6).

Even when students didn’t communicate explicitly about language or literacy development, their writing often provided insights about their strengths and struggles and offered opportunities for Jamy’s targeted mediation. Given dialogue journals’ emphasis on communication, for example, students rarely hesitated to engage in hybrid language practices (e.g., using Spanish words in a predominantly English entry when comparable English words weren’t known and/or Spanish terms conveyed intended meaning better than their English counterparts). This positioned Jamy to learn from students in ways that diverge from what teachers stand to learn from standardized, scripted instruction.

For example, Maria’s entries indicate (Figure 2, Figure 6) some aspects of her developing language—like her confusion about letter–sound correspondences for b, d, and v—transferred across Spanish and English. But her entries also suggest differences in her learning across languages. In Figure 6, Maria’s first entry (in Spanish) included little, if any, punctuation, while her English entry included excessive periods. Although the periods initially appeared to be placed at random, closer

FOR INQUISITIVE MINDS

For those interested in learning more about dialogue journals, these resources are good places to start.


In this early article about dialogue journals, Staton discusses how sixth-grade teacher Leslee Reed writes back and forth with her students on a daily basis. The article provides an overview of the positive consequences of using dialogue journals, both in terms of students’ writing progress and their personal development. Staton emphasizes how students’ intrinsic motivation to communicate with their teacher facilitates improvement in both the forms and the functions of language over time. In addition to academic benefits, dialogue journals provide a safe space for young adolescents to ask questions about topics ranging from confusing lessons to playground bullying to physical fights. The article includes quotes from students and the teacher about the journaling experience and is an excellent introduction to the benefits of using dialogue journals.


The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) is a resource for teachers of English Learners of all ages. CAL conducts research on effective instructional strategies for English Learners and posts many of the findings on its website. Teachers can download free “digests,” or research reports, on current topics in English Learner education (e.g., assessment for English Learners, bilingual education, cultural diversity, language dialects, etc.). In addition to the digests, the site has other tangible resources for teachers of English Learners, including book recommendations and videos. It is also possible to read more about dialogue journals on CAL’s website, as using dialogue journals is a strategy supported by the organization’s research.

Language Arts, Volume 91 Number 3, January 2014
analysis revealed Maria’s understanding that a capital letter must follow every period. Knowing that “I” must be capitalized, she inserted periods before all but one capital letter, even when capitals were not signaling new sentences. These tendencies—which Jamy addressed in her subsequent mediation—likely would have gone unnoticed had Jamy been using pre-packaged, English-only curriculum.

Based on what she saw in Maria’s entry and understood about Maria’s language development, Jamy decided to address Maria’s b-d-v confusion in both languages and to emphasize punctuation use first in Spanish where the cognitive demand was lower, rather than in English where the cognitive demand was higher and where such instruction would have been (temporarily) overwhelming. Thus, both the entries and instructional decision making they informed lend support to Nassaji and Cumming’s Optimal Learning Environment (OLE) Conditions: http://www.cgu.edu/include/For%20Web%2006-07_Ruiz%20OLE%20Conditions%202006.pdf

The “Optimal Learning Conditions for Language and Literacy Learning” is a set of 12 conditions that foster and facilitate learning among English Learners. Some of the conditions include the following: student-centered (where students’ personal experiences anchor instruction), authentic purpose (where students engage in meaningful language and literacy work), and response (where students receive personalized and timely responses to their work). Dialogue journals embody these conditions, as well as most of the others. The OLE conditions are a useful resource for teachers of English Learners (and all learners) to help gauge whether their classroom practices are maximally beneficial for language and literacy learning.


This edited volume contains 42 chapters about journals of various kinds, focusing on different subjects and grade levels. More information about dialogue journals as discussed in this article is provided, but the topic of journal writing is also greatly expanded in this collection. In addition to a range of chapters on teaching language and literacy through journals, contributors discuss journaling in subjects from elementary mathematics to secondary chemistry to political science to music. This book is an excellent resource for teachers and teacher educators looking to broaden their knowledge base about the use of journals across grade levels and content areas.

*Language Arts*, Volume 91 Number 3, January 2014
who were struggling to make friends and develop a sense of “belonging.”

Paired to encourage one another’s academic engagement, Oscar and Pedro, strong bilingual students and good friends, enjoyed writing about sports and video games. A representative entry, in this case by Pedro, read:

Dear Oscar, Of course we’re the bomb we beat them like three times on the championship already. We got to do well on the test to you know. . . . And we got to eat a healthy breakfast o lik Tony the tiger sais, “There great!” I hope we have good grades man so that we can pass grade O.K. Sincerely, Pedro.

Here we see Pedro using his typical, jocular tone, even while encouraging Oscar academically (i.e., to do his best on a test), and employing writing conventions (e.g., quotation marks signaling speech) to communicate authentically with a friend. Taken on the whole, the entry speaks to the underlying connection between Pedro’s sense of academic motivation and his friendship with Oscar.

Gabriela and Adele also enjoyed writing about shared interests and experiences—visiting Mexico, spending time with family, and titles of favorite books. Within the journals, Gabriela tended (as intended by Jamy) to assume a teaching role, to which Adele responded positively. For example, after Adele asked Gabriela if she would like to learn about her puppy running away, Gabriela—underlining in her own entry the words Adele misspelled, just as her teacher sometimes did—responded (see Fig. 7).

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Trying Out Different Voices for Different Audiences and Purposes

Dialogue journals have been shown to support ELs in learning to write for different purposes and audiences (Peyton, Staton, Richardson, & Wolfram, 1990; Wollman-Bonilla, 2001). We extend this argument to show how students’ deployment of different voices for different audiences and purposes positioned them to develop academic identities and mediate each other’s learning, including language learning. This was perhaps most evident in students’ “partner” journals.

Partner journals operate much like teacher–student journals; however, students write to one another rather than the teacher. Specifically, Jamy constructed pairs based on language proficiency, academic strengths and struggles, interests, and personalities. In some cases, she paired students with more and less developed English proficiency so that one could model for the other. In other cases, students who were learning to write in English with Jamy were given the chance to write in Spanish as they dialogued with a newcomer—an approach through which Jamy aimed to honor and deepen all students’ bilingualism. Meanwhile, some pairings reflected Jamy’s desire to build classroom community and her particular concern for socially marginalized students; this, for example, often led her to pair students possessing strong leadership skills with those

Figure 7. Gabriela writes to Adele.

Language Arts, Volume 91 Number 3, January 2014
As Figure 7 also shows, following an entry in which Adele asked Gabriela, “¿What is your Godfather’s name?” and “¿Have you done your first holy communion?”, Gabriela offered an explicit punctuation lesson (“Do you knew that when you ask a question, you don’t put a question mark? Here’s an example: ¿What is your favorite food? It’s not like that.”). Adele subsequently responded with a list of correctly punctuated questions (e.g., “What is your fabret Book? What is your fabret cind of candy? What is your fabret planet? What is your haby?”) for Gabriela.

Jamy’s decision to pair Luis and Joel had as much to do with their interests and language and literacy development as with their social and emotional well-being. Luis—who struggled academically and who other students viewed as difficult—needed a partner who possessed strong Spanish literacy skills and who would offer emotional support and help him forge friendships. Joel, who demonstrated strong language and literacy competencies in Spanish and developing competencies in English (which he practiced in his teacher-student journal), had a reputation as a bully whose lead other students readily followed. Conferencing with Joel before he wrote his first entry to Luis, Jamy made transparent her reasoning for the pairing. Figure 8 represents Luis and Joel’s first written exchange.

In the exchange, we see Luis seizing the opportunity to forge a different identity within the classroom community as someone who communicates in writing, relates well to others, and apologizes for past actions. We also see Joel re-presenting himself as a positive leader, linguistic model, and caring friend. For both students, the journals provided opportunities to be their best selves.

These partner journal entries illustrate students’ capacities to write differently for different audiences and to experiment with different voices and identities. In doing so, journals presented Jamy with additional opportunities to deepen literacy learning. For example, she was able to support students to analyze the voices they used in teacher-student journals and partner journals, which she then drew upon to help students make sense of the different voices authors use when writing for different audiences in different genres. Indeed, Jamy was well positioned to leverage such comparisons to raise students’ consciousness concerning the “codes of power” (Delpit, 1995) and to help them build the knowledge and skills to move between audiences, contexts, and codes, potentially empowering them to navigate the educational system and other systems not necessarily organized for their benefit, without abandoning their communities or senses of self.

On Tender Ground: Risks and Resources

Having mentioned these upsides, we acknowledge the risks that dialogue journals present, particularly in situations where students feel compelled to divulge sensitive information in ways that teachers may not be ready or equipped to handle. Miriam’s manuscript-opening quote begins, “I like [dialogue] journals because the teacher gets to know about me, things I would usually keep from teachers.” This is precisely where the power and the peril reside. Just as dialogue journaling can disrupt power relations, it can reify them, too. The trust that the journal implies can be mishandled or misused. Teachers thus
assume enormous responsibility when they enter into authentic dialogue with students, particularly when they are working in districts where policies—both informal and formal—may discourage, or even prohibit, the kinds of personal exchanges that dialogue journals often elicit.

In Jamy’s case, for example, students commonly shared stories about family members’ citizenship status and accompanying challenges related to border crossings, “la migra,” and employment discrimination. At these junctures, “ideological clarity” (Bartolomé & Trueba, 2000)—an explicitly anti-deficit stance toward students from nondominant backgrounds—was essential, both as a precondition for humanizing dialogue and as a compass for moral and ethical action. So, too, was Jamy’s commitment to confidentiality. This was especially true in the rare instances when students reported mistreatment or abuse by a family member or acquaintance. It is important to note that when Jamy introduced dialogue journals as a place for “private” or confidential exchanges, she also explained that—as someone charged with keeping them safe—she might “need to tell someone” if/when students shared something indicating they may be at risk in some way. Clear communication of this kind increases the likelihood that students understand what may transpire upon sharing tender information; it also diminishes the likelihood that students would interpret a teacher’s required reporting as a betrayal of trust.

Dialogue journaling is hard and complex work. Teachers must learn—and be supported—to respond authentically and responsibly, especially when entries raise issues like those mentioned above; this learning process around the journaling practice, like the journaling practice itself, takes time. This brings us to bigger questions concerning conditions and resources for teacher learning and the inadequacies of both for many teachers of ELs. Our intent is not to ignore these inadequacies, but rather to show the kind of practice that adequate conditions and resources would enable. However, we also aim to show that such conditions and resources would be inadequate without teachers who bring humility, ideological clarity concerning ELs’ rights to a humanizing education, and respect for students and their families and communities. That said, it’s worth mentioning again that the imbalances of power in teacher–student

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### INTO THE CLASSROOM WITH READWRITETHINK

#### Ideas for Using Dialogue Journals

The following resources from ReadWriteThink.org provide more on dialogue journals.

- **Exchanging Ideas by Sharing Journals: Interactive Response in the Classroom**: Pairs of students respond to literature alternately in shared journals. Mini-lessons are presented on responding to prompts, creating dialogue, adding drawings, and asking and answering questions.
  
  http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/exchanging-ideas-sharing-journals-1054.html

- **Launching Family Message Journals**: This lesson introduces Family Message Journals—a teacher-tested tool for encouraging family involvement and supporting writing to reflect and to learn.
  
  http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/launching-family-message-journals-77.html

- **Persuasive Writing: What Can Writing in Family Message Journals Do for Students?**: Building on an introductory lesson, Launching Family Message Journals, this lesson engages children in using writing to their families as a persuasive tool to get what they want and need.
  
  http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/persuasive-writing-what-writing-100.html

  —Lisa Fink
  
  www.readwritethink.org
dialogue almost always favor teachers. Thus, teachers might opt to explore partner or family–student–teacher dialogue journals, which can be equally or more communicative, while also centering the teacher and reducing any disproportionate power in dialogue.

**Returning to Reciprocity: The Rewards and Rigor of Dialogue Journaling**

As our analysis indicates, dialogue journals can offer varied, meaningful opportunities for students and teachers to engage as co-learners. They also offer opportunities for students to draw freely on their full linguistic repertoires and lived experiences. Students can use their first languages without fear of judgment or the anxieties provoked by correction-driven teacher responses. In addition, with the advent of new technologies come potentially exciting possibilities—ones that may offer similarly valuable opportunities for dialogue, while also facilitating students’ development of new media literacies.

Whatever form they take, journals offer teachers a forum for getting to know students, as well as the social dynamics of the classroom, school, family, and community through students’ eyes. What teachers learn about students—their lives, language, and literacy development—can inform more strategic scaffolding of individual, small-group and whole-group learning, as well as help teachers avoid the one-size-fits-all approaches to literacy instruction known to disadvantage students, and particularly ELs (Reyes, 1992). Given this, such journals might be especially fruitful for teachers who are not from the same local community or cultural groups (broadly defined) as their students. Indeed, dialogue journals, if done with respect and care, emerge through our analysis as an unexploitative means for addressing demographic divides in ways that build community, rather than positioning students and their communities as the subject of their teachers’ one-directional gaze (Cross, 2005).

Especially valuable, though not yet explicitly mentioned, is the evidence of growth that journals capture. They are spaces where students and teachers can document and support writing growth over time. In this era of high-stakes standardized tests, and in light of their impact on ELs, the implementation of dialogue journals might even, unto itself, represent an important act of humanization. Done well, dialogue journals treat students as worthy and whole humans, frame them as capable, full of resources, and render their growth visible in ways that are complex and concrete and that involve comparisons to self rather than to an abstract “norm.”

Relational in nature, reciprocal by design, and rich in data, dialogue journals are—at least potentially—rigorous, too. Irrespective of their positions on today’s policy mandates, most agree that students must learn to communicate in writing and for different audiences. To the extent that dialogue journals support students’ development in this regard—and they can (Peyton et al., 1990; Wollman-Bonilla, 2001)—they likely align with and can operate in the service of aspects of the mandated curriculum. Given their legacy in supporting students as readers of and writers for multiple audiences, in multiple languages, and for multiple purposes, the curricular and pedagogical possibilities encompassed within dialogue journals likely also extend beyond those made available by mandated curriculum.

**References**


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