

FIELDWORK

NOTES FROM EXPEDITIONARY LEARNING CLASSROOMS

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An Intricately Woven Picture: STRONG CONTENT BREEDS STRONG WRITING

BY GISELLE ISBELL

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How do compelling topics make strong writers?

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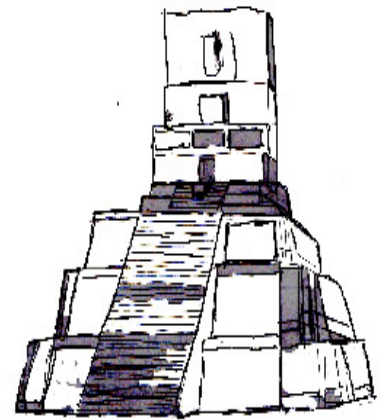
By Maxine Sacks

For more teacher tools related to this issue, visit our website at www.elob.org/publications/webarchive/v13n1tt.html.

Thank you for teaching me how to write. I couldn't write this before I had you...

—from a 5th grader's end-of-year note.

To many people, these words may appear to be a child's simple sentiment of another year spent in school. Yet, when I read this note from my student, I felt the weight of his words in my heart. You see, he would not write before we proceeded on our journey together. He came to my classroom, at Anser Charter School in Boise, Idaho, with a list of language goals and his previous record placed him at a year behind grade level. However, by springtime he had found his confidence and was making real, emotional connections to others in his writing. I began to wonder what actually helped my student find his voice. Was it the use of exemplary models and the revision process? Was it the support of the other community members? Was it finding a desire to write? Perhaps it was due to the child's development and readiness. It is difficult to link his success to any one of these isolated elements. The story is better told like weaving on a loom, understanding how the threads come together



The Temple of the Masks is the second largest temple in Tikal. This temple along with the Temple of the Great Jaguar borders the Great Plaza of Tikal. Also known as Temple II, the temple of the Masks reaches a height of 125 feet tall and its base is 30 feet wide. The temple sits on a giant pyramid and is the burial chamber for a very high placed princess who was named Ich'aak K'aks. It was constructed around 700-800 A.D. Temple II is called the Temple of the Masks because it has three stucco masks on the roof comb. These represent the gods of fire.

— Colin Unnasch

Colin Unnasch, a sixth grader at Anser Charter School in Boise, Idaho, did this draft temple for his scale model of the Temple of the Masks. His summary is displayed with the scale model.

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to make the whole.

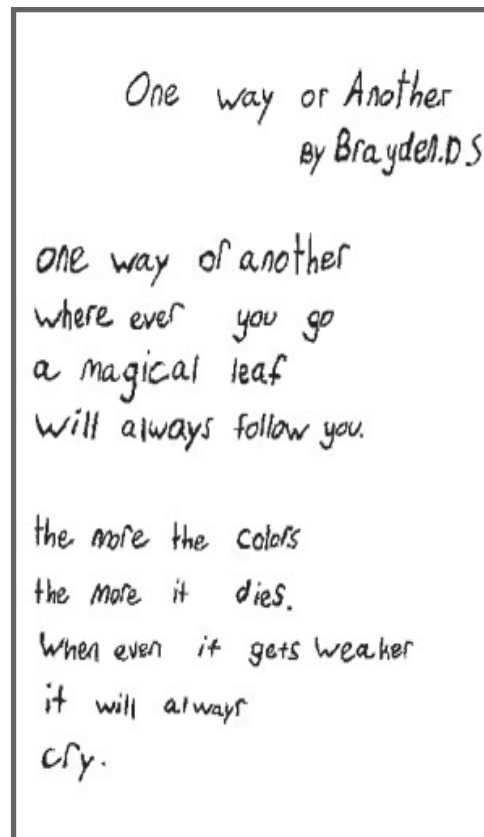
Of course the story is not so simple to begin, I tell myself as I read over our state's literacy standards. The students have to understand and use the writing process, edit for correctness and clarity, and write a multiple paragraph essay. Oh, then the details creep in. How and when should I teach the different formats such as descriptive paragraphs or biographies? I now understand that a compelling topic is the thread that weaves together the writing curriculum: rich content, the six writing traits, the writing process, multiple writing opportunities, and a writer's passion, all to create authentic accomplishment.

During my early teaching years with the idea of a three- to four-week "integrated unit" driving my lesson planning, I made great attempts to connect each writing piece to a content topic. I tried to give them enough schema to develop ideas for their writing, but their writing voices were shallow and often superficial. How could they "show not tell" when they barely had enough experiences with seeing and feeling the topic themselves? Also, why would they want to write about something that they had no genuine vested interest in?

I see voice as the writing trait that unlocks the writer's spirit, and for this reason, I think it can be the most difficult to cultivate. Too often I see children who are stuck for ideas, or who cannot put words on the page. Sometimes I think that within the child there is an internal struggle; he has ideas, yet is afraid to put his voice on the page. It takes a risk to put into words personal feelings, rich emotions, and playfulness with language. This requires exposing your very personal self to others, all the while knowing that your writing might be judged and not liked by someone. Yet, a supportive community, coupled with a genuine reason to write, can spark ideas and nurture the writer's voice within.

COMPELLED TO WRITE

After teaching in an Expeditionary Learning school, I fully appreciate how the depth of the expedition content becomes the student's impe-



Students studied poetry and then wrote their own poems during an expedition on the power of water at Pikes Peak School of Expeditionary Learning in Falcon, Colorado. Third grader Brayden Sanderson wrote "One Way or Another."

tus for writing. Investigating a topic through many layers forces the students to delve into a complex issue and to feel the pulse of an intriguing time, place, event, or conflict. When the writing pieces are embedded in a compelling expedition, the students have a sincere purpose to write and the background knowledge to support their conclusions. They are the experts; their opinions and ideas matter.

Last year we studied the Mayan civilization asking the guiding question, "What makes a sustainable civilization?" Before we could begin to explore the question we wanted to gain a better sense of the region and the past and present culture. Our first writing assignment was to write business letters to organizations and people asking for information. The students were research-

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The Poetry of Water:

DECONSTRUCTING AND WRITING POETRY WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

BY CLAUDIA SMITH

J.J.: I think I get it! I think I get it! I think it means ... knotted and knitted means that somebody made a blanket and then they are all in the forest and they are like camping in the forest and it is like a wet blanket that somebody made.

Nineteen third and fourth graders inch their way across the circle toward the poem displayed on an easel in our reading area. The tape recorder, perched on a stack of books, gets bumped but continues to run, capturing my classes inferring, concluding, and connecting. Their excitement and engagement level rises as they call out their interpretation of Jane Yolen's poem "Tangle." We are in the final stages of our weekly poetry work. The stage my students refer to as "solving the mystery".

Our yearlong expedition explores the power of water. Most of the content is science related with strong emphasis on nonfiction reading and related research. I was concerned that students would not have enough opportunity to experience rich and creative fictional writing—there just are not that many quality stories about water out there—but especially, that they would miss out on poetry.

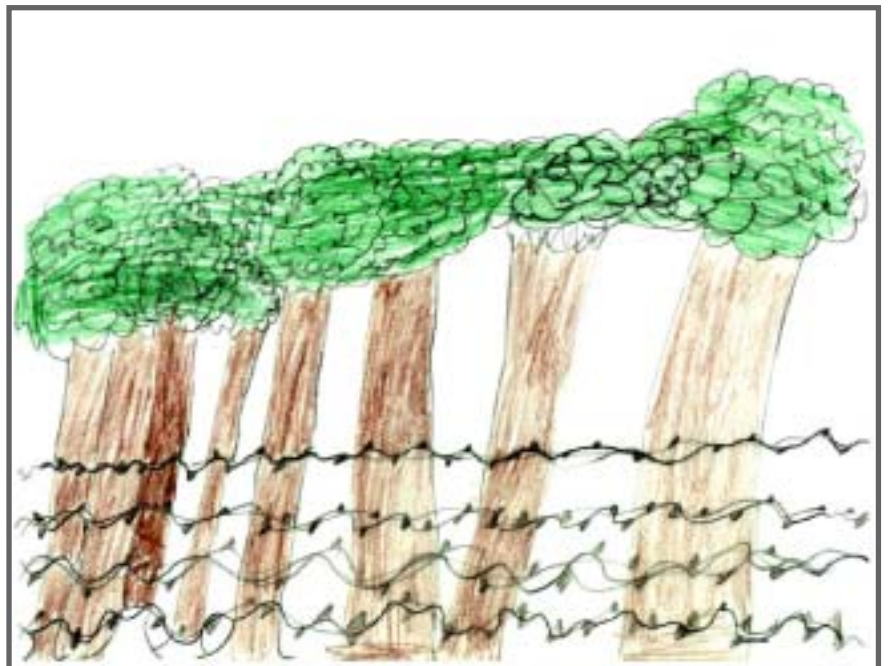
Poetry reading and writing had become a passion of mine after I was introduced to Georgia Heard's work *Awakening the Heart* (Heinemann, 1999) while attending a Colorado Writing Project summer seminar. While planning the expedition and looking for anchor and supporting texts, I came across a collection of poems by Jane Yolen titled *Water Music* (Wordsong, Boyd Mills Press, Inc., 1995). The poems are complex and stretch my

students just enough to feel a true sense of accomplishment once they have reached a possible interpretation.

For me, poetry is an intriguing way to teach the 6 +1 TRAITS of writing and to model comprehension strategies (see resource box on next page). Students tackle short pieces of text focusing on ideas, voice, word choice, sentence structure, organization, conventions, and presentations in preparation for their own writing. Poetry also lends itself beautifully to tapping into schema, making connections, drawing inferences, and identifying mental images. After reading Jane Yolen's poem "Tangle," Aaron demonstrated the latter beautifully during a class discussion:

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After studying the Jane Yolen poem "Tangle," Preston Miller, a third grader at Pikes Peak School of Expeditionary Learning in Falcon, Colorado, drew this illustration.



I can see a tree and it has vines, just a whole bunch of vines all over the tree and it is all confusing and it is not like normally wrapped up! Like they are in a big glob of vines because it says it is messed up!

The poetry work begins with building background knowledge of structure, organization, voice, word choice, and sentence fluency. A poster-size copy of the model poem is displayed in the classroom. On the first day, we simply enjoy the rhythm and rhyme of the poem, reading through it several times. The following day is dedicated to discussing what students notice about the poem. Here we look at the structure of the poem and the children point out rhymes, punctuation, sentence length, and sentence breaks. I chart their thinking and guide the conversation toward understanding how poems are different from prose. Children then create their initial written responses by recording in their journals what they think the poem is telling the reader.

TANGLE

By Jane Yolen

A muddle, a meddle
Of natural wire:
Green leaf and yellow leaf,
Stem, stalk and briar.

Knotted and knitted
In natural angles,
A watery coverlet
Made of wet tangles.

From the collection Water Music, by Jane Yolen (Wordsong, Boyd Mills Press, Inc. 1995).

Casey: *I think this poem is about a girl taking a shower then drying her hair off. When she brushes her hair she has lots of tangles.*

Erika: *I think this poem is about a swamp. I think that because the mental image I get from this poem is a picture of something swampy.*

Jenneah: *I think this poem is about a tangle in somebody's hair and they are combing it in a bath or shower. Somebody is combing or brushing the kid's hair. Or someone is knitting a sweater or tying a knot in something.*

On subsequent days, after re-reading the poem, the stu-

RESOURCE

6+1 Traits of Writing: The Complete Guide Grades 3 and Up. Scholastic, Inc., 2003.

dents list their I Wonder questions and identify words they feel they need to know to gain understanding. Unfamiliar words are tackled during a focused word-study lesson. We select two to three words for every session. Once we have identified each word's part of speech, we look for how other authors use the word, show examples of how we would use the word, and finally develop an explanation. We check to see if the explanation and the word usage fit into the poem and question whether our current explanation of the word helps us to understand the poem. This is the point where multiple meanings of words surface and children discuss them.

Kristen: *Muddle means confused and meddle means messing around with somebody.*

Hannah: *Maybe she got all frustrated.*

CAS: *You mean Jane Yolen got all frustrated? What gave you that idea?*

Hannah: *Because ... I think it was meddle ... doesn't it like ... Doesn't interfere mean like mad? Like frustrated? Maybe she was trying to move the vines and they would not move and they are like interfering with her.*

The remaining days are spent taking the poem, section by section, and developing meaning. We discuss mental images created by the poem and look for connections to previous poems or personal experiences. We share and chart our interpretations. Sometimes we audiotape these discussions and I create transcripts to be posted in the classroom. Kyle's description of his mental image not only gave me an understanding of his poem comprehension, but also reminded me of his love for math. Geometry fascinates him and he is beginning to look for geometric concepts in other subject areas.

Kyle: *What I was thinking was that when it said knotted and knitted in natural angles is that there were vines that were already not tangled up and the rain washed them away ... and they got all knotted up and they got together and [at] every single corner of the tangle there was an angle. Angle and tangle rhyme!*

In our current expedition work, we have identified how little of the Earth's freshwater is actually readily available to us. The children are mesmerized by this fact and have become more aware of the need for water

conservation. This has led to a final project: a poetry anthology, authored by our class, which would make readers aware of the power, beauty, and preciousness of water. The children are now ready to begin writing their own poems after spending time taking apart other writers' works.

To spark student interest and ideas, I have used Rachel Carlson's *The Sense of Wonder* (Harper Collins, 1998), which includes amazing nature photography by Nick Kelsh. After our first use of the book, we write a class poem. I show the children one of the photographs and ask them to list words or short phrases inspired by the picture. We then follow this by a popcorn read: students call out a word or phrase especially important to them and I record it on the board. I chose this protocol because it requires students to slow down and makes them more aware of the image or mood individual words create. Once the class generates an image-rich list, we discuss how to connect some of the ideas into short phrases. They soon catch on and begin to dictate a poem to me (see sidebar above).

Later, we repeat this activity with a different

CONSTRUCTING A CLASS POEM

Popcorn Word List

fall	drifting	quiet
loop	colorful	tall
leaves	beautiful	mossy
rocks	green	dead
reflection	watery	blue
wood chips	little	shady
branches	gorgeous	yellow
tree	peaceful	slowly
waves	joyful	orange
river	ripples	jagged
stream	lichen	

Fall

Beautiful yellow and orange leaves

Covered by dead branches.

Joyful wandering along mossy banks.

Sitting under shadeless trees.


Watching slowly drifting blue waters

And peaceful waves,

Rippling over lichen covered rocks.

Fall.

photograph, but rather than writing a class poem, I ask students to work in pairs. They use the class-generated list, make connections between expressive phrases and words, and draft a poem. From this collaborative step we move into independent work, following the same protocol and outline. Once the children draft several poems, I ask them to select one poem they would like to bring to polished completion for publication. We follow the familiar steps of self-critique and peer critique, make revisions, write new drafts, and finally edit the work for conventions. The completed poems will be illustrated using water colors and collected in a class anthology.

Writing poems is a laborious process and has lent itself to comparison with the long arduous travels of a water molecule through the water cycle. My students are learning to value the final product—their poems—just as they are learning to appreciate the availability of fresh water at the turn of a spigot. 

Claudia Smith teaches in a third- and fourth-grade combination classroom at Pikes Peak School of Expeditionary Learning in Falcon, Colorado.

A nature photograph inspired third- and fourth-grade students at Pikes Peak School in Falcon, Colorado to list descriptive words in their popcorn read. The list then helped the class write the poem "Fall" together.

Connecting to Civil War History:

FINDING VOICE IN WRITING

BY SARA SPRISTER

Thomas, I don't want to lose my best friend to some war. You just have to stay. Think of your poor family in the morning when I come up to them and hand the letter to your Pa. I don't want to see the blood drain from his face as he reads that letter. I don't want to see your ma turn back into the house sobbing her eyes out ...

Now that's voice! When I read Ben's response to one of the RAFTS (see sidebar below) I had developed for our eighth-grade Civil War study, I knew this writing strategy would be an effective addition to the literacy component of our expedition. I had been seeking methods to incorporate voice in all students' writing since our school, Arbor Vitae-Woodruff Middle School in Arbor Vitae, Wisconsin, had adopted the 6+1 TRAITS model three years ago.

I wanted to help my students relate to the historical facts and significance of the Civil War on a more personal level. I hoped they would feel empathy toward real people, and realize the agonizing choices and great sacrifices that were a part of this "brother against brother" war. By inviting students to respond

to the RAFTS on the Civil War, I thought they would have the opportunity to internalize these emotions before we conducted our Civil War simulation at Camp Jorn YMCA where they would play the roles of soldiers in a regiment to fight for the North or the South.

STRUCTURING THE INVITATION

To structure the Civil War RAFTS, I began with a clear statement of purpose:

Students will make connections and respond to nonfiction texts and primary sources. Writing responses will help them prepare for and understand the content of *The Boys' War*, by Jim Murphy (Clarion Books, N.Y., 1990) in order to understand the human experience.

This text easily lends itself to a RAFTS invitation because it is a nonfiction account of the Civil War, which includes several diary and journal excerpts describing the experiences of real boys near the age of eighth-grade students.

Next, I did research to identify appropriate readings to lead the students to empathize with real Civil War-era people. I selected three readings from *The Boys' War*, one introduction to the war and two firsthand journal accounts. I located on the Internet (<http://www.historyplace.com/lincoln/proc-1.htm>) the actual proclamation issued by President Abraham Lincoln to call up the militia in April 1865. In the book *The Day Fort Sumter Was Fired On*, edited by Jim Haskins (Scholastic Inc., 1995), I found a print of an authentic recruiting poster to serve as the final primary source. After carefully reading these materials, I composed three RAFTS as writing prompts for the students to complete.

WHAT IS A RAFTS?

The acronym illustrates its components: Role, Audience, Format, Topic, Strong Verb. By intentionally organizing a RAFTS to address a specific outcome, teachers immerse students in reading and writing on a particular study. By providing them with relevant readings on the topic, students acquire background knowledge and motivation to investigate the topic further. The RAFTS writing invitation also merges best practices for group work and discussion.

—Sara Sprister

I divided the students into groups of four and asked them to read, "The War Begins," which describes the bombing of Fort Sumter (*The Boys' War*, pg.1). I wrote the date April 12, 1861 on the board and asked students to respond in their journals to specific questions designed to elicit voice and connect emotionally with the book content. Each group then came to a consensus and recorded its ideas on a class chart.

I was pleased to note that the responses included precise emotional reaction:

~ The Union Army would feel afraid because they had just been attacked....They would be shocked and angry at the South....They would wonder what will happen next....They would be pumped with adrenaline and want to fight back...

~ The South would feel victorious and confident after a day of triumph....They would feel proud to fight for something they wanted....They would be excited yet scared because the war started...

~ Parents of sons would be worried, scared, protective.They might feel proud that their sons would fight for their country....They might not want their sons to get involved...

Once we had completed and displayed the class chart, I passed out the April 15, 1861 proclamation issued by President Lincoln. One student read this in character, and then we held a debrief of its contents to help students understand the main points. Next, I passed out the call to arms poster and loudly proclaimed its message as would have been done when these posters were delivered to every city, town, and village. Each student silently read, "So I Became a Soldier" (*The Boys' War*, pg. 5), which includes the firsthand accounts of two young boys describing how the news of the war and the call to arms spread.

I then presented the first RAFTS:

~ You are the mother of four sons, living on a farm in Maryland (ROLE) when the news of the surrender of Union troops at Fort Sumter



reaches your town. The response is swift as every able-bodied man heads to the recruitment center. Your youngest boys, aged 13 and 15, are eager to be a part of this and announce that they intend to sign up (TOPIC). Their father thinks they are "man enough" and can shoot as straight as any man, so he supports the boys' intention. In a conversation (FORMAT) with your husband (AUDIENCE), convince (STRONG VERB) him that he must forbid this and assure you that these two boys will remain on the farm.

Even the reluctant writers wrote steadily for 10 minutes to record their conversations.

Fourth grader Kristen Rutz, a student at Pikes Peak School of Expeditionary Learning in Falcon, Colorado, illustrated the Jane Yolen poem "Tangle" only after thoroughly studying it.

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Hands flew up when I asked for volunteers to share their writing. I heard each author read in character using dialect and voice. The personal connection I had sought to elicit was evident from what Nicole wrote:

... I would be stressed and worried. I would not be able to handle the nervousness...I wouldn't know if they were injured, alive or dead...I am shocked that they would want to go and risk their lives. I am also disgusted that you would think they are ready ...

ASSUMING A CHARACTER

Finally, students read the story of how Elisha Stockwell, a 15-year-old boy from our own state of Wisconsin, joined the Union Army despite his father's objections by persuading a friend's father to accompany him to a nearby recruitment center (*The Boys' War*, p. 11 and 13). Following a group discussion of the reading, I passed out the second RAFTS sheet (see sidebar below), which gave them a choice of characters to assume for the writing.

Ben wrote as Jim Tully, but Kayla selected the first option. She volunteered to read aloud:

Jim, I have to go and join the army. They need as many people as they can, and I am so against slavery, so fighting to ban it is the right thing for me. If I stay, every night and all day I'll be troubling myself, thinking about how all the other soldiers are working hard for what I believe in...

From their responses, I knew the RAFTS had piqued their interest. Now I wondered if this writing experience would transfer to the other writings assigned as we delved into the chapters of the book. It became evident that its content took on more meaning for the students. They recorded in-depth understanding of the facts about the Civil War, problems and solutions encountered by both the North and the South, the horrors of Andersonville, and the dramatic changes these boys experienced. Throughout the expedition, I noticed that students were adding more detail and visualizing in their writing. When I collected a written analysis and critique of *The Boys' War*, which served as the final assessment of this reading, students often cited the examples of Elisha Stockwell and Thomas Galway to support a main idea.

RAFTS offers an opportunity to include writing across the curriculum as an effective vehicle to practice adding voice, connecting with content, and engaging young authors. The words of Andrea express it perfectly:

Before reading this book, I wasn't aware that boys made up so much of the Union and Confederate armies. I had certainly never visualized what the boys went through in such detail. The horrific sights they had to deal with to live amazed me, and it makes me wonder if I was in their position if I could handle it. This book also has made me think of the children involved in wars right now all over the world. ✎

Sara Sprister teaches eighth-grade language arts and reading at Arbor Vitae-Woodruff School in Arbor Vitae, Wisconsin.

RAFTS: WRITING IN CHARACTER

~ You are Thomas Galway, a 15-year-old boy from Ohio (ROLE). You have just enlisted with the Hibernian Guards of Cleveland, Ohio. Your parents are not aware of this and you must report to the company in the morning. You have stolen your Pa's rifle to bring with you (TOPIC). You arrange to meet your best friend Jim Tully that night on the edge of town (AUDIENCE). Write your conversation (FORMAT) with Jim, defending your reasons for enlisting. Read to him the note you wrote to your parents and persuade (STRONG VERB) him to deliver it the following afternoon.

~ You are Jim Tully (R) and have just heard from Thomas Galway (A) that he is leaving in the morning to fight against the Southern insurrection. He has not told his parents and he has stolen his father's rifle. He wants you to deliver a message to them (T). Plead (S.V.) with him not to leave Cleveland and convince (S.V.) him that this decision to join the war is wrong (F).

Woven Picture, continued from page 2

ing the various countries and as a class started generating questions about the Mayan culture, both past and present. Imagine our sense of purpose when one of my students received an e-mail from the Archeological Institute of Belize answering all of her questions, including details about its most interesting archeological discovery. We also established a connection with a school for Mayan refugees in Florida. The children sent several letters and many pictures of traditional dress and customs.

Later in the expedition the students researched various topics related to the daily life of the Mayan people. The class was building a very realistic scale model of Tikal, bordered by dioramas depicting different scenes such as a wedding, a food market, or clothing styles. The research papers served as a foundation for their project, giving them a reason to seek information. We were relying on each student to become an expert and to apply that knowledge to the final product. We donated this final project to the Hispanic Cultural Center, so the students truly understood that their dioramas, model, and the accompanying text had to be museum quality.

We expected each student to address the guiding questions in the research paper. I remember a conversation I had with a group of students about the role pok-a-tok (a very competitive Mayan ball game) had in sustaining their civilization. The fifth graders asked amazing questions: “Do human groups need a source of competitive entertainment? Are humans competitive at heart? Because the game included many religious elements, was this another way to reinforce their beliefs?” This was a wonderful example of how a compelling topic drives our natural desire to think, to express, and to clarify our own ideas and opinions.

SHARED KNOWLEDGE

I have also realized how the common language of the compelling topic supports the writ-

THE EXPEDITIONARY LEARNING WRITERS’ WORKSHOP

The Expeditionary Learning Writers’ Workshop centers on expedition content that invites students to think deeply about the compelling topic and to learn to represent that thinking in a particular genre or format. Students develop a common language to talk about the craft of writing, experience powerful teacher modeling of thinking like a writer, and learn protocols for critique and revision that lead to more effective writing. The workshop promotes students’ understanding of expedition content and strengthens their command of written language so that students write to learn as they learn to write.

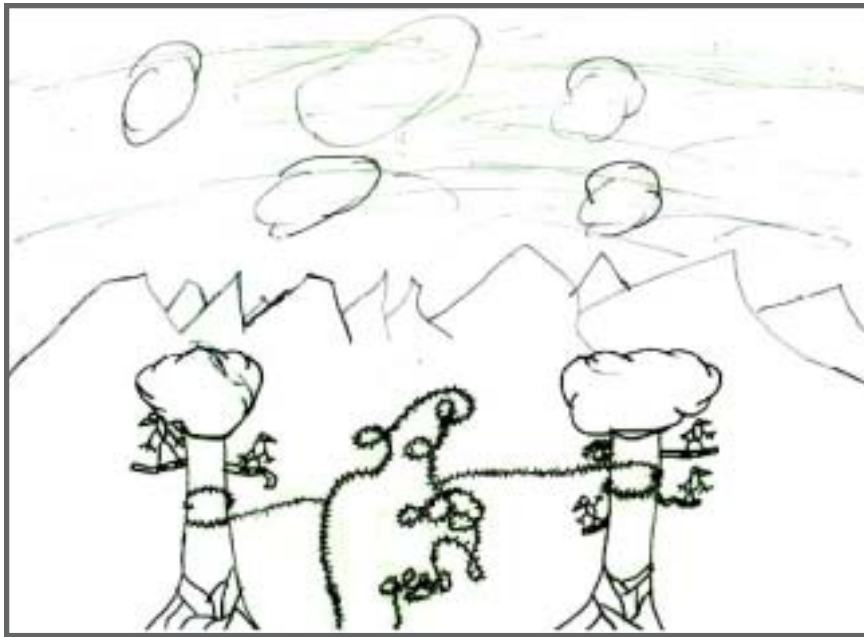
Steps include:

1. A focused mini-lesson that explicitly teaches a particular skill (e.g., how to revise for better word choice).
2. Time for students to practice and apply what has just been taught in the mini-lesson.
3. Protocols for students to critique and respond.
4. Opportunities for students to revise and share their writing.
5. Time to debrief and create anchor charts that describe the students’ shared understanding of traits, process, and craft.

This text is excerpted from a complete description of the workshop, which can be found at www.elob.org/publications/webarchive/v13n1tt.html.

ing process and the use of the six writing traits in the classroom. When the students have a shared understanding of a complex topic, then they can read each other’s writing with a critical eye. They can help each other clarify ideas and develop rich, supporting details. For example, in another project for the Mayan expedition, the students developed retellings of traditional Mayan folktales and designed interactive books for the stories. Throughout the entire writing process, the students gave each other feedback, not just on the writing traits, but also on ideas for the stories and the books. Because they shared so much knowledge on the topic, they were able to discuss symbolism, environmental and cultural elements, and traditional vocabulary.

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Zachary Pruitt, a third-grade student at Pikes Peak School of Expeditionary Learning in Falcon, Colorado, drew this illustration of the Jane Yolen poem "Tangle" after the class studied it.

Woven Picture, continued from page 9

Sometime, somewhere along my teaching journey, I discovered that the progression of writing projects is as essential to developing good writers as are the writing process and topics. During the first part of the year, before the expedition begins, we focus on writing projects that are not too abstract. Then, later in the year, we progress to more complicated, demanding tasks such as expository essays and research reports, which are founded in the expedition. Like a true journey, the compelling topic leads the children into more complex pieces of writing as their schema and questions expand. Reminded of the "slow release of responsibility"

concept, the students, especially the hesitant ones, gradually find the confidence to express themselves.

Several years ago as an undergraduate student, I assisted a professor who was researching children's perceptions of themselves as writers. I interviewed several elementary children from three different schools about what makes a good writer. In remembering those interviews, echoes of "good spellers" or "someone with neat handwriting" surface periodically in my head as I work with some of my students at the beginning of the year. In the end, I am not expecting everyone to love writing or to be inspired to become an author, but I do want every student to know that he/she can approach any authentic written task and be successful. Well, maybe there is more than that. When our journey together is over I really want them:

To honor one's thoughts, validate them;

To have the confidence to share what is important;

To feel the passion that words can carry to one's heart and soul;

To develop moods and emotions that creep into the bones of the readers;

To play with pacing, punctuation, and precise words;

(And of course to be able to write a sincere thank you note).

A compelling topic studied in-depth provides each writer with multiple opportunities to discover the voice within. Slowly the colors and patterns come together to create an intricately woven picture, and the beauty lies in the knowledge that for each writer it's different. It will only unfold before you with patience, perseverance, and careful attention to which threads to pull and when. And when you see it, it is an unspoken gift, yet a voice finally heard. *✍*

Giselle Isbell teaches fifth- and sixth-grade at Anser Charter School in Boise, Idaho.

MAGNIFICENT MAYAN MOUNTAINS

The gargantuan stone mountain known as the Temple of the Double Headed Serpent loomed over all the other massive structures in Tikal. Standing at an astounding height of 212 feet, it cast long, deep shadows over deserted streets. It stood like a giant, visible from miles away. Temples and pyramids such as these played an important role in sustaining the Maya's religion and many other things.

Sixth grader Micah Sandusky, a student at Anser Charter School in Boise, Idaho, wrote this introduction to his report on Mayan temples and pyramids. See website for examples of student work.

Motivating Young Writers Through Service

BY MAXINE SACKS

My second-grade students threw out questions as we toured our local animal shelter, the Pennsylvania Care and Control Association (PaCCA): “How long are these dogs kept in cages? Do they have a chance to run around outside and play? What do they eat while they are here?”

We had intended to collect data about similarities and differences in dogs. But the emotional, outraged responses to seeing homeless, caged dogs led us to a meaningful and engaging service project that motivated the students to write informatively, concisely, and compassionately.

After returning from our fieldwork, the class decided to create pamphlets to inform people about various breeds of dogs. These pamphlets would include information about what the dogs looked like, what they needed, and what jobs the children could have. The children reasoned that this would encourage people to adopt dogs, but only people who could handle the responsibilities that went with owning a dog. Each student chose a breed of dog to become an expert in. They learned how to draw that dog, conducted research, and wrote an essay about their breed.

I believe the students remained engaged long enough to create essays rich in content and full of style for three reasons: they were compelled to learn all they could about dogs; they knew their writing would benefit others; and the process was broken into manageable steps.

The topic of dogs (or any small, furry animal) is naturally compelling to young children. They can be the caretaker instead of the receiver of care; they can be “in charge” of an-

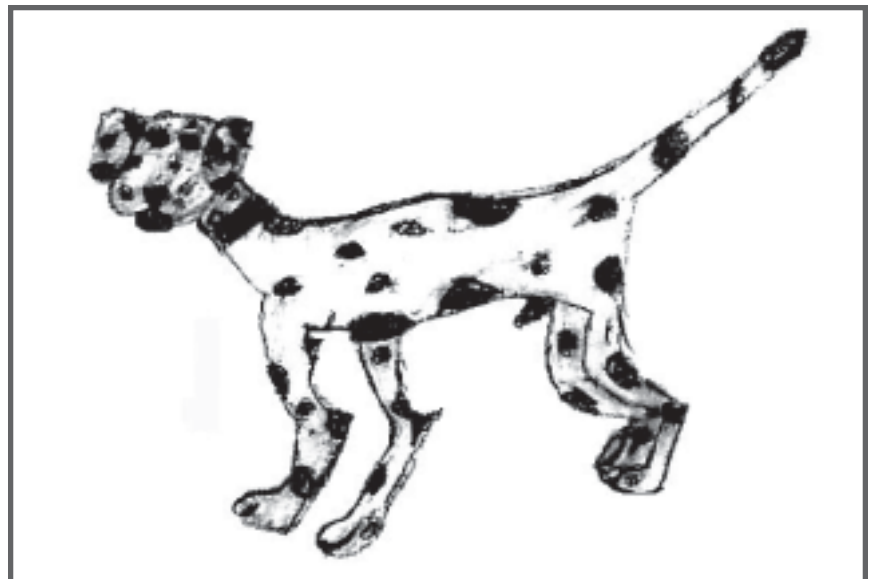
other being in a world where they are constantly being told what to do. But, in addition to their natural draw, my students had a great deal of exposure to dogs before that first visit to the shelter. We had several visitors, read a multitude of books, and looked at tons of pictures. These activities built background knowledge and an increased comfort level.

This step proved to be key to keeping the level of engagement high. They had interacted with dogs and been told about them, but they truly wanted to find out more and were willing to work hard to do so.

The children also knew their work had an authentic purpose and audience. They knew their writing would be published into a pamphlet and that the pamphlet would be donated to a place they had visited. They believed that their work could be the difference between

continued on next page

Chyna Long-Baxter, a second grader from Russell Byers Charter School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania drew this dalmation for her brochure.



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Young Writers, continued from page 11

someone choosing to adopt or not adopt, or could help avoid someone adopting and then abandoning a dog. So, when students needed some encouragement to look in yet another book, write more sentences, or edit their work, I simply reminded them that the better their information, the better off those dogs in cages might be. This was their incentive. It was real and it was powerful.

While the students knew they were working toward creating a pamphlet, we waited until after the writing was done to discuss format. The whole project was broken down into small accomplishments. First, we researched and took notes. Then, we organized our notes into categories. Next, we wrote various sections of our findings. Then, we edited and revised. Following that,

we put all the sections together and celebrated our writing masterpieces. Only then did we look at examples of pamphlets and determine the best way to format our products.

None of us will forget the day the PaCCA came to pick up the pamphlets and other materials we collected. The pride in the students' eyes was apparent to everyone. One of the students recently told me that every time he hears information about the PaCCA he thinks of the work we did to assist them in their mission. When I think of the shelter, I think of all they did to help me in my mission to create empathic, hard working, and literate young people. This service project was compelling, purposeful, and successful for all. 

Maxine Sacks teaches second grade at Russell Byers Charter School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania