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P A N A M A

What a Feeling!

MOTIVATING EFL STUDENTS THROUGH COLLABORATIVE WRITING WITH POEMS

Collaborative writing presents not only a highly motivating learning experience for EFL/ESL students but also a creative pedagogical tool for teachers. This type of activity can yield multiple positive results, including peer cooperation and increased motivation. When students work together on a writing assignment, they learn from each other and edit each other's mistakes. At the same time, the change in the routine from writing assignments individually to writing as a group can be very motivating for students who dislike writing in the first place. Furthermore, collaborative writing can be achieved using relatively simple techniques like the activity described in this article.

First of all, what is collaborative writing? In essence, it means that the student teams up with one or more peers to go through the writing process of brainstorming, organizing, outlining, editing drafts, and agreeing on the final product.

It sounds simple, but it requires careful planning to promote effective interpersonal communication, a key aspect in successful group work. In my country, the idea of collaborative writing is somewhat foreign to most students, so this different way of writing requires some initial training and practice. However, my Freshman Composition students at a U.S. university's branch campus in Panama, a group composed of a mixture of native and near-native speakers of English, were quick to adopt and benefit from the activity.

It has also been interesting to see how collaboration brings personal satisfaction and boosts self-confidence for those students who feel a little overwhelmed by their writing tasks. Giving students the opportunity to be creative, through activities such as revising a story or changing its ending, can be a lot of fun, especially with students who have vivid imaginations. Motivation and enthusiasm also increase when students expe-

rience having their individual contributions and ideas accepted by the group and incorporated in the written product.

Ede (2001) points out that student writers are likely to continue to use collaborative writing outside the classroom in their future jobs. Many professionals, such as engineers, chemists, or psychologists, to mention a few, often write collaboratively, especially for projects that require teamwork and group analysis. Students should be aware of this real life practice of collaborative writing so they will not see this classroom activity as merely “school work” but rather as something they will apply in their future careers.

To effectively implement collaborative writing in the classroom, we must first consider the students’ concerns about writing. L1 and L2 writers often face the same difficulties and doubts when trying to compose a piece. Therefore, we should provide our students with ample opportunity to interact in groups, to share their ideas and concerns, and to help each other deal with specific problems such as outlining, essay patterns, word choice, or syntax. Having this network of fellow writers with similar problems and concerns can create a more stress-free environment and thereby make any composition task less frustrating and more enjoyable. While writing collaboratively, student writers will see their own written work as reading material for an intended audience. Raimes (1984) emphasized the importance of audience as a means of giving a sense of purpose to the task, so in expanding the audience from teacher to peers, the writing task becomes more purposeful and meaningful.

Writing as an isolated activity, as has been the procedure in the traditional classroom, provides limited and delayed feedback to the writer. Widdowson (1984) points out that the writer in this case has to be both the initiator and the recipient of the discourse and consequently does not receive the necessary feedback and support. Collaborative writing, on the other hand, provides feedback and support right away, and the writer can know if the intended meaning is actually being communicated to the reader.

Keeping this in mind, I am always looking for good teaching techniques to stimulate creativity, motivation, and collaboration in my composition class. One of these techniques

came from a workshop called “Tips for Teaching a Text” at the 2004 Panama-TESOL Summer Seminar. The presenter demonstrated some useful techniques that integrate listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities based on various motivating texts such as fables, songs, and poems. He emphasized the importance of choosing texts appropriate for the age, level, and interests of the students. The workshop participants had so much fun working with a poem about feelings that I decided to try a similar exercise with my university students. They also very much enjoyed the activity and produced some extraordinary writing samples (see the Appendix).

I decided to work with the poetry genre for the collaborative writing for a number of reasons. First, poetry works as a medium to spark emotions when used in recitation and literary analysis. Second, the poem is a relatively short form, as opposed to most prose forms, and a very effective one for a single class-hour exercise such as the one described in this article. Third, poetry allows students to free their emotions creatively. For these reasons, the work with this particular genre has been very successful with my composition class.

Group activity

I asked my class to get together in small groups. Then, on the board we did some clustering of ideas on the topic of anger. I asked them to recall how they expressed their anger when they were little children. There was a wide range of responses, from some very serious ones to some more humorous ones such as, “I used to take off my clothes when I felt angry.” These ideas and comments created a pleasant atmosphere in which to begin working together.

Next I handed out copies of a poem about feelings that was written by an 8-year-old girl and asked the class to read it silently. After reading the poem, we looked at the little girl’s illustration that accompanied the poem and imagined just how angry she must have been. Together we discussed the words used in the poem and analyzed the author’s personality and the motives for her anger.

After this discussion about the original text, I asked the class to change the first line of the poem from “I was angry and mad” to “I was happy and glad” and to write a new version of

the poem. The groups worked enthusiastically, sharing many ideas with which to create a new poem. The result was both inspiring and highly motivating. Each group read their versions of the poem, generating a lot of lively participation from the rest of the class. The students were very surprised by the diversity of interpretations rendered on the idea of being “happy and glad,” with some humorous and others more serious. Sharing the poems created a positive learning atmosphere that produced some truly amazing work.

Watson-Reekie (1984, 103) suggested that models (such as a sample poem) “should be introduced and utilized in the writing lesson in such a way as to allow for collaborative activity, both oral and written, for both prewriting discussion and post-writing critique, for both analysis of the model and evaluation of the students’ production.” In our class, the prewriting activity, the clustering activity in which students related the topic to personal experience, enhanced the written product with creative, humorous, and beautifully poetic content.

While the activity discussed in this article was based on poetry, collaborative writing can be used with other genres as well. If time permits, students can also be encouraged to collaborate in the writing of essays and research papers, genres that are closer to their academic lives. While the teacher loses the tight creative packages that poems offer, she helps students gain experience in writing for other university classes. Furthermore, with the lengthier process associated with such genres, the individual tasks may be even more clearly defined, particularly with research responsibilities. As students become used to collaborative assignments, the possibilities for cooperative learning become endless.

The benefits of collaborative writing activities in language teaching are numerous. First, collaboration promotes individual participation, increases self-confidence, and encourages productivity—all of which are realistic and worthwhile goals for the teacher. It is often more difficult to accomplish these goals when students are working individually, especially with large classes and shy students. Second, teamwork enables students to learn from each other and stimulate each other’s sense of creativity. Third, the activity can be fun, which should always be a goal of instruction. By sharing and working together, students will find that writing can be an enjoyable activity that allows them to express their ideas, even in poems, as they never thought they could. Now that’s a good feeling!

References

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APPENDIX | FSU-PANAMA FRESHMAN COMPOSITION STUDENT POEMS

What a Feeling: Motivating EFL Students through Collaborative Writing... • *Amarilis Montero*

Feelings

I was happy and glad
And it seemed that there were lilies inside me.
And as I got happier and happier,
The lilies spread and grew for others to see.
I was so happy I could feel the roots dangling
down my toes.
Then I began to see colours.
I saw the rainbow reflected in my leaves.
Suddenly, there was peace.
I was so happy it weakened my knees.
The wind threw me to the trees.
Hey! There goes my leaf.
As the other leaves saw freedom, they flew
to find their leaf-mates.
I felt my body burst and suddenly I became one
with the land.

by: Emanuel Romero, Keren Bachar,
and Rita De la Guardia

Feelings

I was happy, full of joy
and it seemed I was in a roller coaster ride,
and as I went higher and higher
my smile grew wider and wider.

I felt my feelings were going to collide.
Then I began to see balloons,
confetti and streamers of all colors.
As I went higher and higher
my ears began to ring cheerful melodies.

I felt like singing inside.
It was magical,
I didn't want it to stop,
this fuzzy feeling inside.
Nobody could stop me,
or retain me if they could.

The happiness grew on inside.
Then suddenly it stopped, and it was gone
as on ground I had arrived.

by: Juan F. Mantovani, Carolina Muñoz,
Mariella Gaffrey, Leila Nilipour

Feelings

I was happy and glad,
And it seemed that I could jump and touch the sky.
And as I got happier and happier,
I felt closer to the stars.

Such happiness I could not hide.
You could only tell by the shine of my eyes.
This feeling was all mine.
It was my treasure—my poetry line.

But such happiness I could not hide.
It was so great; it didn't fit.
I just could not hold it inside.

Then I decided to do it.
I was going to go get my star.
And with the constellations in sight
I jumped high to the sky.

Suddenly I fell off my bed.
I woke up; it was only a dream.
But I was still happy,
Even though I didn't get my star.

I had a dream that made me happy.
It made me remember.
Somebody once taught me
That no star was out of reach
Even in real life.

It was my dream,
Something I had created in my mind.
So it was my happiness,
A feeling all mine.

by: Madelaine de la Ossa, Eduardo Rodriguez,
Michael Hamoui, and Daniella Tribaldos