Extensive Reading Materials Produced by Learning Communities

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Abstract

This article advocates that students and teachers create some of their own extensive reading (ER) materials. Learning communities act as a means of motivating and sustaining student and teacher production of ER materials. The article begins by explaining learning communities. The bulk of the article has two parts. The first part focuses on student-created ER materials, discussing benefits and ways to produce such materials. The second part does the same for teacher-created ER materials. It is suggested that involving students and teachers in creating ER materials facilitates more egalitarian, more caring education practices.

Introduction

Previously, learning was viewed as a solitary activity that individuals engage in by interacting with their surroundings and constructing their own representations of the world (Piaget, 1980). However, while individuals' input and knowledge construction are indeed important, most current views of learning see it as situated in social contexts (Vygotsky, 1978), with people in communities learning from and with each other. This spirit of community resonates in the African proverb "It takes a village to raise a child."

Emphasis on the social nature of learning has led to the term "learning community" (Kellogg, 1999; Lave, 1988; Roth & Lee, 2006) and efforts to establish such communities (Blady, 2011; Saville, Lawrence, & Jakobsen, 2012; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). A learning community can be defined as diverse people working towards enabling the learning of all, especially students.

Learning communities are not confined to those directly involved in teaching and learning. Anyone who seeks to create an environment in which learning and learners are valued and supported can be considered a member of a learning community. Thus, members of learning communities can include students, teachers, administrators, others working in and for educational institutions, family members of these people, and people in relevant organizations, such as government bodies, nonprofit organizations, and private companies.

Specific characteristics of learning communities include those listed below (Francis, Morse, Lieblein, & Breland, 2011).

1. Easy and regular communication takes place among community members.

2. Trust among community members facilitates and is facilitated by this communication.

3. Every community member, regardless of status, feels valued and has his or her contributions honored.

4. Without neglecting the needs of the community as a whole, learning community members have space to pursue their own interests and needs, rather than following a one-size-fits-all curriculum.

The current article presents one way of implementing the concept of learning community. This involves teachers and students in creating materials that students use in extensive reading (ER) (Day & Bamford, 1998; Extensive Reading Foundation, 2011; Jacobs & Farrell, 2012). Extensive reading can be defined as students reading large quantities of comprehensible reading materials. This article explains the whys and hows of students and teachers creating ER materials, beginning with student-created materials.

Student-Created ER Materials

Why Use Student-Created ER Materials?

Deller (1990) proposed several benefits of student-created ER materials.

1. When students create ER materials, they are taking initiative and have more control over what they read. No longer are they confined to materials that already exist in libraries, bookshops, or on the web. As a result, students may feel a greater sense of ownership of their own learning.

2. Materials can better suit students' backgrounds and interests.

3. Students may feel less threatened by reading materials and activities based on those materials, as students created the materials.

4. Students gain insight into language and, specifically, writing. They see that books do not grow on trees; books are written by authors, and students can become authors, too.

5. Teachers and peers learn more about other students by reading the ER materials they create.

6. Teachers enjoy greater variety because instead of using the same reading materials year after year, they have new, student-created materials every year.

7. Student-created ER materials help overcome financial constraints faced by educational institutions.

Deller's (1990) list of benefits matches well with the characteristics of learning communities mentioned earlier in this article. First, students' writing allows them opportunities to communicate about their lives, ideas, and interests with other community members. Second, when students' writing becomes part of the materials used for learning, students feel that others trust them to be doers, rather than only receivers. Third, those usually at the bottom of the education hierarchy (i.e., students) are accorded status as book authors. Fourth, student-made materials give students scope to pursue and develop their unique interests, while at the same time contributing to the goals of the overall learning community.

How to Facilitate Student-Created ER Materials

Some learning community members may fear that students, especially younger and lower-achieving students, will not be able to create use-

ful ER materials. The ideas below attempt to address this legitimate concern.

1. Students can create ER materials for younger, less proficient students. This makes the task of writing more doable.

2. Students can use previously read books as models. The changes to these models can be as small as changing the visuals in a picture book or changing the setting of a story to the place where the writers live.

3. Students can use writing that they have done for other purposes and convert it into ER materials. An example would be compiling student projects to create a book. A table of contents and an introduction could be added.

4. Similarly, a group of students or an entire class can choose to write on one theme. Before writing, the group or class can do reading, viewing, and observation to build their knowledge on the theme. Cross-curricular themes can be used. The following paragraph is an example, adapted from Jacobs and Farrell (2012), of students writing on a mathematics theme.

    As part of a measurement unit, students worked in pairs to create measurement books. These books were to be used as study tools and resources. The guidelines for writing the books included that they needed to contain at least six pages: one page each on a different unit of measurement of length, weight, and so on, with a visual to represent items that could be measured in that particular unit. When finished, each pair rotated around the room to read, examine, and experience other groups' products and give them written feedback based on criteria developed by the class. This feedback emphasized the positive in the other groups' books.

5. Students will often need teacher guidance, before and while writing, and teacher editing, while and after writing. Thus, teachers become editors of students' writing. However, care must be exercised to ensure that students still feel ownership of their work.

6. Students can act as peer editors. This may reduce but does not eliminate the need for teachers' supervision. Other learning community members can also be involved before, while, and after students write. For instance, an animal welfare organization could provide resources to boost student knowledge on the lives of hens raised for their eggs. The same organization might be able to fact-check student writing and publish some of what students wrote on the organization's website.

7. The writing that students produce should have the features of professionally produced publications. These features might include a foreword, acknowledgements, a table of contents, an introduction, and visuals. Student writing can also be published on a website, on a blog, or through other media.

8. Hard copies of students' work should be able to physically stand up to repeated readings. Perhaps with help from learning community members, such as the students' family members, materials could have covers, binding, lamination, and other features to enable the materials to be enjoyed for many years. Two versions of the same work can be produced.

    a. Heavy-duty versions to stay with the teachers and to be available for reading by classmates and future students of the same course.

    b. Less rugged versions to go home with the students to take an honored place on the family bookshelf.

Celebrating Students' Writing

To further show that student-created writing is valued, celebrations of various sorts can be held. Here are examples.

1. Author parties can be held, in which students give brief presentations about or reading from their works and then take questions. Refreshments and decorations can add to the celebratory atmosphere.

2. Students' writing can be loaned to the school library, and the authors can receive thank-you notes or certificates from the library.

3. When student-created materials go in a class library, the library's cataloging system can include those books with indexing by author so that students present and future can find each author's works—for example, a student might search for the works of an older sibling, friend, or neighbor.

Teacher-Created ER Materials

Read the following excerpts from the reaction of one teacher—Daryl Lenos, who was taking a distance education course on Extensive Reading at the time—to the idea of teachers as writers of ER materials.

When I first began reading about teachers as ER materials writers and I realized I, a teacher, was being asked to be the composer of ER material, I was shocked. Why should teachers reinvent the wheel, or in this case, the literature, for the purpose of reaching particular students who are reluctant readers or readers who have difficulties, such as English as a second language students? It seemed absurd: too much time and too much energy, as if we have nothing else to do. Nonetheless, I decided to be the good student and finish with the article and somehow, somewhere between benefit number one and the end of the document, I began to see something of value in the theory of using the teacher as a writer.

Teachers already spend time searching for the right work; so, time may not be as big of an issue as I thought. We also spend too much time trying to explain writing that may not connect to the students, another waste of time. I realized that I understand my students and the curriculum better than anyone else. I even began to think about how many times I have created pieces of writing to act as samples anyway, and the idea of the teacher as the writer began to cement itself into my head.

As I read the "how-to" section, I continued to make mental connections. I never really thought of taking existing documents and altering them; it seemed wrong. I never liked borrowing ideas; it seemed wrong. And I rarely looked to colleagues for assistance; shouldn't I stand on my own two feet? But perhaps it is okay. I think I . . . let me rephrase that, I know I already do these things! Maybe, with a little work and a little common sense, the teacher can become a writer of ER materials. (Jacobs & Farrell, 2012, pp. 39–40)

Why Use Teacher-Created ER Materials

Many teachers are similar to Mr. Lenos in their negative initial reaction to the idea of creating ER materials for their students. Below are some benefits that students, teachers, and other learning community members can reap from teacher-created ER materials.

1. All students can be good readers when they have the right materials to read. Unfortunately, even with the aid of the Internet, helping reluctant readers to find the right reading materials can be a long and frustrating task. Students reading in a second language often have particular difficulty finding materials that are both comprehensible and interesting. Teacher-created materials can help fill this void, and, once created, these materials can help many students, term after term.

2. Following from the first benefit, teachers know their students and their curriculum better than do the authors of books typically found in libraries and bookstores, authors who have never met the students.

3. Similarly, teacher-created materials can be as fresh as recent events, thereby providing just-in-time and just-in-the-right-place reading matter that is linked to the lives of students and other learning community members.

4. In learning communities, everyone learns, not just those officially designated as students. Teachers can improve their own language skills, particularly their writing skills. Too often, teacher writing is confined to short emails, notes to students, and official reports. As a result of this limited use, teachers' writing skills can atrophy. Fortunately, writing skills expand with use.

5. Teachers who write may become more understanding of students' writing difficulties.

6. New electronic tools for writing, editing, and publishing materials become available all the time. Creating ER materials encourages teachers to use and learn about these tools, information which can later be introduced to students.

7. In learning communities everyone's contribution is honored. By creating their own materials, teachers further enhance their image in their own eyes and the eyes of others, especially when they see students enjoying and learning from the materials which they, the teachers, produced.

8. Further increasing teachers' esteem is the fact that, as with student-created materials, teacher-created materials provide an inexpensive source of reading materials. This cost saving is much appreciated, especially in times of tight budgets.

9. Perhaps the most important benefit of teacher-created ER materials arises from teachers serving as models of writing for their students. As a result of students reading their teachers' writing, when teachers ask students to write, teachers are saying, "Do as I say *and* as I do." They are also saying to students, "Writing is fun and rewarding; please join the fun."

How to Facilitate Teacher-Created ER Materials

Before some suggestions for facilitating the production of teacher-created ER materials are provided, it should be pointed out that other learning community members can also produce ER materials. Now, here are the suggestions.

1. Materials need not be started from scratch.

   a. Teachers can adapt existing materials to their students' needs—for example, simplifying certain words, adding background knowledge that students may need to comprehend the materials, or deleting or rewriting less interesting or less relevant sections of existing works.

   b. Teachers can borrow ideas from works they have read or seen—for example, creating new versions of fables by modernizing and localizing them.

   c. Teachers need to read and respond to students' writing. While doing this, teachers can polish students' writing to create good

models and attractive reading. Of course, the student who wrote the original would still be the author or coauthor, even if teachers do major reshaping and rewriting. If several students write on a re-lated topic—for example, their career goals—or in a related genre—for example, horror stories—these short teacher-rewritten pieces can be combined into something of an anthology.

d. Teachers can recycle works they themselves wrote when they were students—for example, secondary school teachers can share some of their secondary school writing with their students.

e. Teachers can share what they write for nonschool purposes—for example, an email to a government official on a contemporary issue.

f. Remember that teacher- and student-created materials can be non-fiction, not just fiction, or can blend fiction and nonfiction. Indeed, in most careers, at higher levels of education, and in life generally, most writing is nonfiction.

2. Teachers can collaborate with colleagues.

a. Professional writers have editors. Fellow teachers can act as each others' editors.

b. Teachers can combine their different strengths, such as using vivid phrasing, drawing, layout, or doing research on a particular topic.

c. Multidisciplinary ER materials can be created by teachers who teach different subjects.

3. Materials need not be long, even for older, more advanced students.

a. Short works—as short as one page—can go into files of materials on similar topics.

b. Collections of stories can make up a larger book. Similarly, teach-ers of the same subject or the same type of students can combine their works into a single anthology. Student works can also be included.

c. It is best for teachers to start small and build their skills and confidence. Thus, the first pieces teachers write may be short pieces used for intensive instruction rather than for ER.

d. Teachers' writing, as well as students' writing, can include a paragraph or a page entitled "About the Author(s)." Here, authors provide information on their backgrounds, including their interests and other works they have written or plan to write. Similarly, student and teacher writing can include an acknowledgments page, thanking those who have helped them in their lives or with this particular piece of writing. Indeed, many authors dedicate their books to special people, such as their parents.

e. Who knows? For a few teachers, writing for students and others may become a career or at least a supplementary career. For instance, Suchen Christine Lim (2007) was a Singapore teacher who now writes full-time. Jack C Richards (2013) was an ESL teacher who went on to become a best-selling author of textbooks for ESL students.

Conclusion

This article began with a description of learning communities, a diverse group of people who come together to promote the learning of students and others. The article's main focus was on how learning communities can combine to produce ER materials. First, some benefits of student-created ER materials were explained, followed by suggestions for facilitating such writing. Second, the same was done for teacher-created ER materials, benefits followed by suggestions for facilitation.

Learning communities and ER both flow from a paradigm shift in society that has affected education. This paradigm shift moves society toward more egalitarian, more caring practices. Dewey was a philosopher of education who helped inspire this shift. He believed that "there is no greater egoism than that of learning when it is treated simply as a mark of personal distinction to be held and cherished for its own sake. . . . [K]nowl-

edge is a possession held in trust for the furthering of the well-being of all" (1934, cited in Archambault, 1964, p. 12).

Happy writing to you and your students!

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CONFERENCE ANNOUNCEMENTS

ACTA International TESOL Conference. October 30-November 3, 2014. Australia. "TESOL: Meeting the Challenge." E-mail: Kristi.sheldon@ncsonline.com.au

MEXTESOL. October 16-19, 2014. Puebla, Mexico. "Mindful Teaching: Transforming Lives and Achieving Goals. E-mail: mariatrapero@hotmail.com

41st Puerto Rico TESOL Annual Convention. November 14-15, 2014. Puerto Rico, USA. "No One Left Behind: Integrating Multicultural Perspectives in the English Classroom." E-mail: prtesol2014@gmail.com

TESOL Italy's 30th National Convention, Learning Communities. November 14-15, 2014. Rome, Italy. "Learning Communities, Content and Language: Perspectives and Practice, Fostering Inclusive Education, Competences for New Generations." E-mail: tesolitaly@gmail.com

TESOL France Annual Colloquium. November 14-16, 2014. Paris, France. "Professional Development, Language Acquisition, and Learners of English." E-mail: tesolfrance@gmail.com

SILC 1st International Conference. November 15, 2014. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. "Motivation in ELT." E-mail: conference@interlink.edu

20th International Conference of IAWE. December 18-20, 2014. Uttar Pradesh, India. "Asian/African Contexts and World Englishes." E-mail: ravindergargesh@gmail.com