

EXPRESSIVE WRITING: WRITING TO LEARN

Some Samples

Sue Watts teaches science in a British intermediate school. In addition to their records of experiments, her students keep diaries in which they reflect on what they are doing. Here are two examples of what the children wrote:

Carol

Today we played another sort of guessing game on one of the benches we had three trays half full of water one was hot one was cold and the middle one was warm. First of all we put our hands into the cold and hot trays then after a minute we put our hands into the middle tray and they felt very different my right hand felt cold and my left hand felt warm but this was wrong because both of them should have felt the same because the water was all the same temperature. After we had done this we were given a thermometer and we found out the temperature of my fingers and my temperature is 35°C.

Ann

In the science laboratory we have been looking at many different things, I was particularly interested in mercury and why it is so heavy. I once learned that you get mercury in a thermometer and that if you drop the thermometer and it smashes all the mercury will spread over the floor and turn into silver balls. I was also interested in a piece of lava, and that is why it comes out red from a volcano and goes grey after. I found out that heat causes rock to melt and that lava is really molten rock. So that when it spurts out from a volcano it turns back into rock when it cools down. If the red hot lava goes over anything or anyone when it cools down it preserves them.

Samples from Bryan Newton,
Schools Council Research Project

Some Clues

The teacher who introduces the use of journals or diaries in the content areas may find it takes practice before really useful communication gets underway. Plan to read and respond to — but do not correct or grade — these writings. Be sure

students know their writing will be shared with you. Allow time for writing about learning activities soon after they happen. Beyond this don't be discouraged if:

- **students don't write much at first**
This may be a new experience for them. They hear many examples, both from other students and from the teacher, before they become fluent.
- **students' initial attempts at expressive writing lacks candor and authenticity**
Because this is a new experience for students, they haven't yet developed the trust in you, their audience, which enables candor to emerge. Be encouraging in your comments and ask students questions about what they write.
- **students reveal in their writing that they clearly don't understand what you've been attempting to teach them**
Use this information as a valuable insight into the teaching-learning process. By questioning, try to elicit from the students more specific information about the state of their understanding and build from there.

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