Dialogue Journals:
Passing Notes the Academic Way

by Christine Cziko

My name is Carlos. I’m in Ms. Cziko’s first period. I am fifteen-and-a-half years old and I hate school. I liked the first chapter of this book and I’ll think that I will enjoy the rest of the book. And I also hate school. I hate it so much that I had to mention it twice. But then who doesn’t?

When students are lined up, searched, and ordered into classrooms each day, the message is pretty clear. Made to feel unwelcome at best and criminal at worst, control becomes the most compelling lesson of the school day. Even within classrooms a “pedagogy of control” — worksheets, copying from the board, multiple-choice tests, assigned compositions — seems to many teachers the most appropriate way to teach in this setting. To some it is nothing less than a survival strategy.

For the last 12 years of my 20-year career teaching English in New York City junior and senior high schools, I have been struggling to find ways to actively engage my students in reading and writing. I have turned away from “objective” questions and answers about literature to reader response logs. I have stopped using grammar texts in favor of a process approach to writing. I don’t assign research papers but instead try to engage kids in critical inquiry leading to “I-Search” papers. I’ve replaced tests with portfolios. In short, I’ve tried to put the student at the center of his or her own learning. It has been an uphill journey. When teachers invite students to be active learners in a school like mine, it’s no surprise that the invitation is looked upon with distrust.

Yo, my name is Avisilda and I don’t like this book. It a waste of my damn time. I’m in Ms. C. class 6 period. If I read this book it because they force me.

I teach in an inner city, comprehensive high school of over 4,000 students, 99% of whom are African American, Caribbean or Hispanic. The school is dirty, overcrowded and sometimes dangerous. There are 17 full-time security guards who use metal detectors to search students and scan their book bags for weapons as they enter the building each day. There are 10 deans who use bull horns in the hallways to order kids to class or race to the scene of fights called in regularly on their walkie-talkies. The attendance is low, the dropout rate is high and the morale is near zero for both students and staff.
In a dehumanizing environment like this one, many students become either passive or actively hostile. Hostile students spend much of their time in the dean's office, on suspension, roaming the hallways or simply cutting school. The majority of students try to find ways to get through the day, get through the term, get through school and get out.

For a number of years, I had been asking students to write "literature logs" — personal responses to books we were reading in class. The results were mixed. Students who already liked to read seemed to enjoy writing in their logs and often wrote many pages of personal reactions to the books. In these cases, the problem became my inability to respond to their writing. With five classes of over 30 students per class, if only half of my students wrote in their logs, I had 80 students to write back to. As a result, a real "conversation" about the book wasn't possible, and some students complained that they were just writing to themselves.

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The more serious problem was those students who just didn't read. Many of my students find reading a task with few rewards. Some have never read a complete book and lacked both the confidence and motivation to try. They were also put off by the solitary nature of reading. Clearly students couldn't create meanings or become engaged in texts that they didn't read. These students' literature logs remained blank.

What's up. I'm Eddie. What's up Felix and Carlos. I hope y'all follow my footsteps. Anyway, the story wasn't so bad in the beginning but I don't like it. I don't like to read period besides the fact that its boring or not boring. I hate to read. I will read but reading and I don't get along.

My name is Curtis. I'm in Ms. Cziko's eight period class. ... Between you and me, Jackie, I never read a whole book before.

What I needed was a way to get kids reading, and then engage them in ongoing and authentic conversations about their response to what they read. I knew that social concerns were high on my students list of priorities. It was in social settings that they came to life — you could feel the energy and excitement in the halls, the cafeteria, the schoolyard — while the classrooms were dead. School itself was seen by most of my students as a primarily social institution.

*Anyone going to the Evander dance tonight? Well I am. You might see me. Today I have on an orange ACA Joe sweatshirt, purple Guess jeans and brown, orange and purple Nike A.C.G.'s. I might have on my glasses and my ponytail is to the side. I'm kind of tan and you can't miss me, so if anyone sees me you'll could say hi!*  
—Rhonda AKA Ron-dn

I had to find a way to build on kids' social interests — to connect what I wanted kids to do with what they wanted to do. I had to figure out how to engage students in ways that met both their academic and social needs.

At a workshop sponsored by the NYC Writing Project I heard Dixie Goswami describe a journal writing activity that one of the Breadloaf teachers, Dale Lumley, was using in his classes. He called it peer dialogue journals. Students from one class were paired with students in another class who were reading the same books. The students carried on a written dialogue in a shared journal about what they were reading.

The idea seemed to be just what I was looking for, though I realized from the start that I would have to adapt the activity to make it work in my urban school. First, I would have to get the materials — the school wouldn't provide the journals, and it was unlikely that students who often came to class without notebooks or paper would buy their own logs. Since we did have loose-leaf paper and I owned a stapler, I enlisted a few volunteers to staple together 30 sets of 12-page "logs." These logs were also easily transportable — a necessity when you must move from classroom to classroom to meet your students each day.

Second, I realized that I couldn't simply partner students in my ninth grade classes. With an average daily absentee rate of over 30%, many kids would end up with their partners absent on any given day.
I don’t know what’s going on in the book because I’ve been absent. I haven’t really read but I’ll catch up.
—Thomas

Nobody hasn’t written so far. I guess everyone is absent today. I hate writing to myself or answering myself. Well, at least I know I’m passing...
—Melissa

So I decided to group four students in each log — one from each of my ninth grade English classes.

Finally, I had to get a book that I thought students would find interesting to read. I chose *The Pignan* by Paul Zindel. Though its main characters are white, suburban and middle class, I hoped that the humor in the book as well as the universal concern of teenagers with issues of identity, conflicts with parents and relationships with the opposite sex would engage my students even though they were black and Hispanic, urban and working class, or poor. Besides, it was the only ninth grade novel available to me in sufficient numbers for four classes to read at the same time.

*My name is Tyrone. This story is dumb. It is confusing the way they talk about things. The curse words he should had left in the story to make it more exciting. Peace with chicken grease!*  

*Hello, my name is Khalilah. I thought the story was OK. I like the way John describes his feelings. From what I have read it seems like it may be an interesting story...*  

*Peace. I read chapter 1, 2 and 3 and I still think its a boring book because its not real. I only like gangster stories so this book isn’t for me. Peace.*  

—Andrew

During the three weeks that it took us to read *The Pignan* students wrote willingly in their journals and eagerly read the writing of their partners. I did not “teach” the book with questions and answers or class discussions centered on what I thought was important. I did create a list of writing activities, separate from the dialogue journals, that invited students to write about events in their own lives that paralleled events in the book (the death of a friend, a first kiss, a party that got out of control). Other than that, what I provided was a timetable — which chapters to read by when — and a structure for class time.

Each day students could spend time reading their journals and answering their partners, working on their writing activities or reading the novel itself. An occasional “reading check” (credit or no credit for keeping up) gave the more reluctant readers an extra push. Discussion of the book took place among students solely within the pages of their journals. I served as advisor, mentor and cheerleader.

I gave my students few guidelines for their journal entries except that they had to write something about the book each time they wrote. At times, conversations in the journals became so social that the book was almost forgotten. Once, after about a week of writing, I asked students to either ask their partners a question or answer a question their partners had about the book.

*Hi, its me again, Joel ... I have a few questions. Why did the Pignan let John and Lorraine in his house at...*
the beginning of the book, and why did he work himself out and nearly have a heart attack? And why did he let John and Lorraine use his house? Why does the Pigman trust John and Lorraine so much?

Joel, he probably trust them so much because he is lonely. And he would probably trust anybody right now...

—Felicia

Hello, its Danny. I agree with Felicia, Joel. He trust them so much because he is lonely. And they did make good friends. Sometimes when people get old they have to have an anchor to help them keep in touch with reality. They were his anchor and his second trip to youth.

As I had hoped, real conversations about ideas, and inspired by reading, were happening in the logs. They weren’t happening for everyone or all the time — but when they did happen, there was an authenticity that had been missing in most of the “class discussions” I had tried to initiate in other classes at other times.

Students were admitting confusions...

Hi everybody! I have completed the reading of chapters 14 and 15 but I really did not understand the ending of chapter 15. Why? I don’t know, but it seemed a little too confusing for me. Could one of you girls explain it for me? Thanks! Bye People!!!

—Roy

I also thought the ending of chapter 15 was confusing. This is to Roy — I thought that at the end of chapter 15 John was thinking and talking about how peoples’ lives are like cages. We only have so much space and we must make the best out of it for everyone...

—Latasha

defending opinions...

Hi, its me Joel. .... I agree that John and Lorraine did take advantage of the Pigman. But, I feel that it’s not Lorraine and John’s fault for the Pigman’s death. The Pigman should have known that he is an old man, maybe he feels or thinks he’s young, but he can’t do things that young people can do. ... In other words, make believe John and Lorraine represent a gun salesman. Now the gun salesman sells a gun to the Pigman. Let’s say the gun represents fun. Now if the Pigman uses the gun (fun) but kills himself with it, who’s fault is it? The gun salesman (John and Lorraine) or the one who used the gun?

and exploring their feelings as they read together.

I finished reading the book and I thought it was good. John and I relatively feel the same way about death, sometimes I really do feel the same way he does, I feel like if death is going to take me, take me now, don’t wait so long.

—Joanne

They were using writing as a tool for knowing and connecting to each other in a school environment where most felt anonymous and alone.

But more happened in these logs than I had anticipated. As a teacher I had my own intentions for the writing — academic intentions. I wanted students to explore theme, analyze character, make predictions — all the stuff that would make me feel like I was being a “real English teacher.” Yes, these kinds of discussions were happening, but my students also had other ideas, their own intentions. They were building social communities within the pages of these logs, communities in which they argued, encouraged, flirted, apologized, advised, and confided. They were using writing as a tool for knowing and connecting to each other in a school environment where most felt anonymous and alone.

Awilda, I am sorry if I kinda dissed you about your handwriting. I hope you accept my forgiveness. James, you so right about what you said about I shouldn’t have tell Awilda about her handwriting. Vito, I don’t hear too much from you but you still my friend.

—Trina

If you look good, Khalilah, why don’t you write your phone number so my man can call you.

—Omar

Charlene, I know your vex with me. I like the Bulls that my choose. You like the Knicks and that your choose.

—Tameca
Tameca, I'm sorry about what happened. I like the Bulls and the Knicks but it just annoys me that everytime I try to talk to you, you have an attitude...
  —Charlene

What's up, it Eileen. ... By the way Tameca and Charlene, both of you have attitudes, so stop it.

Within their dialogue journals, my students interacted socially in writing. The immediate feedback they received from each other encouraged them to keep writing and to keep reading. Reading, in fact, became a required activity in order to participate fully in this new and interesting social setting.

I enjoyed writing in the log. That's actually the only reason why I read the story. It wasn't a lot of effort put into this log but at least we did communicate. Bye.
  —Tawana

The logs provided students with a place where it was "cool" for them to talk to each other about literature — conversations which often can't be initiated by kids among their peers without risking adolescent scorn.

I really didn't write much about the story. But I read all of the entries you guys had written and they were very funny. You all sound like cool people. And I should have made more responses to all of you.
  —Peace out Jason

I enjoy having like a writing pen pal. The book was interesting and so were the comments in this log ...
I ready to read another short book. As long as its short,
  Sincerely, Eddie

At the end of three weeks we had finished reading the book and I decided to ask students to write a final entry in their logs. It was the end of May, the term would be over soon, and though I felt that something exciting had been happening during these last few weeks, I was eager to actually read the logs to find out what it was.

Well I've just finished reading The Pigman. I have enjoyed it ... Oh! last but not least, it was really fun writing to you all, and even though we're finished reading the book it would be nice if we can still write to each other, saying what we are doing in Ms. Cziko's class. Goodbye! Everyone!!
  —Felicia

Hi everyone. Here are just a few lines to let you know I enjoyed having the opportunity to write my comments and opinions in this log with you. I hope you all enjoyed the book like I did. I think more teachers should do things like this more often ... Well now is the time to say goodbye to all of you. Goodbye and keep up the good work in Ms. Cziko's class.
  —Latasha

Well, hi again girls. This is our final writing and I think I'm going to miss you guys writing to me. But I'll see you around I am going to miss Eileen with her words, the way she said them. And Charlene, miss you because the Bulls win and we can't argue over nothing. I don't know nothing about Diana. But it was nice having you guys as a friend. Bye Eileen, Charlene and Diana.
  —Tameca

Dear Jaclyn,
I'm afraid this has to be the last entry in the log. I've had fun writing to you and I hope you enjoyed writing to me. Although we never saw each other I feel we have known each other all our lives. It is not easy to tell someone who you never met anything about yourself, but, somehow, I found it easy to do. I really admire you and respect you, Jaclyn. Who knows, maybe someday I'll stop by your gym class.
  Your friend, Curtis

My mind is filled with ideas — and with questions. I've already begun dialogue journals with my new group of ninth grade students, but I don't want to simply repeat what I did before. I want to find ways to help students build on the private conversations that occurred between them in their logs so that they can enter into more public discussions — public writing — through which they will learn to present their ideas to a broader audience. I want to help my students "go public" with what they think, both in form and content, without losing their authentic voices.

I know that I helped create an environment in my ninth grade classes in which the necessary first step of engagement could take place — necessary but not sufficient. This term I plan to take a more active role in the dialogue journals. I'm reluctant to enter directly into journal conversations. I don't want to upset these tentative learning communities with my loud "teacher voice." But I will, with students' permission, bring continued on page 11
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to whole classes the issues and debates that emerge in the journals. I hope to help students begin to find more public forums for the ideas that spring from social conversations and private concerns.

In an odd way I’ve circled back to where I began. How do I continue to find ways to connect my academic intentions for students with the private and social intentions they hold for themselves? Dialogue journals seem to me to be one bridge across this chasm. I continue to look for others.

One thing, though, is clear to me. Finding ways to connect students’ social interests to academic intentions can result in powerful learning — learning that engages both the mind and the heart.

Christine Cziko wrote this article while she was a teacher in an East Coast urban high school and a teacher consultant for the New York City Writing Project. She now teaches at Thurgood Marshall High School in San Francisco. This article will appear in Cityscapes: Views from the Urban Classroom, to be published this fall by the National Writing Project.