It was another lunchtime meeting and we were racing for consensus before the bell sent us scurrying to our classrooms. I glanced nervously at the clock, and at the stack of ungraded papers on my desk. Two minutes and the bell would ring. Some of my sixth period English I students milled outside; I could see them through the scratched, tinted plexiglass windows of my portable.

"Hey! Is that a fight outside?" said one of my colleagues.

Not my kids I thought, as I bolted across the room on pure reflex.

"Over by the parking lot!" added another colleague. With relief I saw the two students were not mine—why is it I always feel so responsible? They’re my students not my children.

I sprinted toward the crowd about 100 yards away. My thighs would be sore tomorrow.

"Looks like it’s you and me again," I said to the Dean, who stood precariously between two swearing, clawing young girls. A crowd had gathered, faces eager for a spectacle. "Let ‘em fight!" someone shouted. There was a ripple of laughter, and the antagonists strained to get at one another again.

My patience disappeared with the laughter. "This ain’t no circus," I shouted. "Get to class now, or we’re all going to the Dean’s!" As other teachers arrived the Dean added, "Start taking names." Kids scattered like spilled marbles.

I was angry when I returned to class. Very angry. "What the hell’s going on around here?" I groused. "Why is everybody beating up on each other? And then people stand around waiting for blood like it’s some kind of show. It makes me sick!"

"Relax, Mr. J., it’s just a fight," said Angel, matter of factly. "Everybody likes to see a good fight once in a while. It’s fun!" Angel likes to test. She once filled two pages with This is stupid’s, her journal exercise for the day. She got full credit; I wrote back, You’re right!

"Fun?" I roared. But before I could say another word the discussion was on. I moved to the board, picking up chalk to write what was said: They don’t care about anything but their reputation. Somebody say somethin’ about your family, you got to fight. There’s people who like to stir shit up with he-said she-said stuff. "Could you find a more appropriate way to say that?" They don’t want people to think they’re weak. "Is it worth it?" Sometimes, ‘cause it keeps people outta your business. You get more friends. "What kind of friends like fighters?" People who need protection. Fighting ain’t protection. ‘cause you just be fighting again save your reputation. Naw, you don’t. Yes, you do, you be hella fightin’ once you get started.

"Okay, so let’s see if you can weave some of these ideas into a writing that shows us why kids get into fights," I said, reading the writing on the wall. "Let’s make this our journal topic today."

After ten minutes of heated brainstorming we had covered a lot of ground. The board was full, and they set upon their journals with relish to "show me why kids fight so much around here." The heater rattled in the wall, the only sound as twenty-

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Stephen Jubb

Journal Partners

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seven students, a heterogeneous group of Black, white, Asian, and Latino ninth graders, wrote furiously for the next ten minutes.

"Take another minute to finish the thought you’re on,” I said. Then, “All right, meet with your partners and read, please.” There was a rustling of papers. The students, sitting four to a table, began to read aloud to each other in pairs.

Terrell and Dusty had exchanged journals and were reading silently. When I first paired them they would not read to each other. “Just try it for a week, and I’ll switch you if you can’t get along,” I told them. Dusty is working class Portuguese, wears nothing but black jeans and black death rock T-shirts, and wants to pass his classes this year very badly because other wise, he says, his mom will send him back to his dad, and, says Dusty, “He just kicks my ass.” Terrell is Black, fifteen, and affects a hint of defiance, but is really only quiet and protective. They finally started cooperating just before I was about to give up on them.

I walked over to their table. “Did you read aloud?” I asked. They looked at each other. Terrell rolled his eyes; he knew what was coming. “Did you?”

“Naw, man,” rolled Dusty. “I don’t like to.” Dusty has a hard time reading, especially his own writing. He does not capitalize and forgets ending punctuation. With four months of almost daily journal writing under his belt, however, he now can fill a page with writing and use words like superfine and metaplane more or less correctly.

“What’s the value of reading aloud?” I insisted quietly.

Terrell, rolling his eyes again, recited, “It helps us hear what our writing sounds like.”

I kept looking at Dusty, who finally added, “And you can tell things you don’t be gettin’ right, like puttin’ capttal letters on the front and stuff.”

“Do you believe that’s true?” I asked. When the two boys both nodded, I continued, “Is there a reason, then, why you wouldn’t do what’s expected of you? Especially if you acknowledge its value?”

Busted. They tossed spiral notebooks at each other. “I’ll go first, man,” said Terrell.

The students read to each other, finishing off by rereading each other’s work silently and writing responses. On the board I wrote, “I agree/disagree with the part that says _____, because I think _____.”

“Here’s a model for your written response,” I said. “See if you can find the part of your partner’s writing that causes your strongest reaction and work it into a sentence like this.” A few minutes passed and writing turned to talk. Except for Alia and Regina. Regina was still writing in Alia’s journal.

“Mr. J., Regina’s writing a whole another entry in my journal!”

Regina held up her left hand, still writing with her right. “Almost done!” she said. “There!” She signed her name with a flourish. Alia began reading the response eagerly. Regina watching with a smile. Regina and Alia did not know each other before they became journal partners. Regina is Filipino, Alia is Anglo, but they both wear their hair the same, mussed straight out from their faces in defiance of gravity. I tell them they look like sunflowers, but I don’t think they get it.

Across the room Mi Ling huddled with Willie. Mi Ling came to the U. S. from Hong Kong six years ago and carries a dog- eared Cantonese-English dictionary wherever she goes. She never speaks in large group situations, but she reads her work carefully to her journal partners, especially Willie. Before he worked with Mi Ling, Willie had shown very little interest in writing about anything but horror movies, and he had only just begun to write more than a few sentences. But it seemed that the pairing of the two had worked an unexpected magic. Willie took great interest in helping Mi Ling pronounce English and making her sentences “sound right,” as he put it. I am convinced I never would have got him to look at dictio n or grammar otherwise. He also wrote more and better, as if he was more conscious that he was modeling English for his partner. Sometimes when discussing their writing, I overheard Mi Ling pronounce words for Willie in Cantonese, which he would faithfully try to repeat. “Chinese sounds fresh!” he told me once.

“All right, let’s wrap it up,” I announced. My students were talking now, mostly about fighting. At one table, three were listening to one student read. Ray was recounting the blow-by-blow of his fight earlier in the year when he was suspended.

“Can we read some out loud?” asked Arletha. Arletha is my star. Bold, Black, and someone to whom candidness comes naturally. “Roger’s is kinda neat, and he’s too shy to read it for himself.” Roger reminds me of Eor, from Winnie the Pooh. He blushed.

“Oh, what the heck. Sure, let’s read some of these. Go ahead, Arletha.” She reads his journal entry about getting into a fight in fourth grade because he was too scared not to fight. We

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read more and the period is over. Later, at the end of the semester, when the students do their journal self-evaluations, more than a third of the kids pick the “fighting” entry as one of the two best entries for me to read. Roger is one of them.

My first public school teaching assignment came in 1986, and it was a new teacher’s nightmare. I was handed three low tracked English classes — two of them with freshmen — and two basic math classes. The last math class I had taken was in 1967. Hired in late October, I was to face some angry, turned off, inner city kids who had suffered through six weeks of substitutes and a steady stream of dittoes. They were the classes left over, the ones nobody wanted.

Sitting in the school lunch room that first day, I introduced myself to some of my new colleagues. “Oh, you’re Mr. D’s replacement,” said a History teacher through his Cup ‘O Noodles; “He had another nervous breakdown and I don’t think he’ll be back this time.” Welcome to public school.

I got a tableful of advice that day: Don’t smile till January. The worst ones’ll drop out by February. Don’t take any crap! Don’t agonize over the failures, some kids just don’t want to learn. Get through the year, and maybe you’ll get some advanced classes next year. I also received a tableful of raised eyebrows when I stated my belief that all children want to learn.

“After you’re here for a while you might think differently,” said one of my new advisors.

“No, I don’t think so,” I said. “I really think kids naturally have a fire for learning. It’s just that somehow that fire fizzles out after years of not doing things good enough or fast enough, and it’s our job as teachers to help them light it up again.” I insisted, as people gagged on their tuna fish sandwiches.

“Rookies!” I thought I could hear someone say.

My strategy was to keep my curriculum simple until I had my sea legs, and until I had a better sense of what might work best. The journal seemed manageable. From there I envisioned a tidy writing process: students pulling material from their journals, working through response groups and revision toward publishing their writing for new audiences. In my imagination I saw apathetic, alienated youths turning to diligent readers and writers, adolescent hostility giving way to the discovery of the joys of self expression and creativity.

I saw a picture of a successful English class forming in my head.

Well, I barely survived that first year because nothing had prepared me for the day-to-day reality many of my students carried into the classroom. Most of them had long histories of low expectations and failure. The experiences that dominated their lives and influenced their learning made up a laundry list of urban ills: drugs, abuse, teen pregnancy, alcohol, family problems, poverty, and violence. After one of my earliest response groups erupted in a fist fight and I lost one of my most promising success stories to juvenile hall, I realized the picture in my head was not destined to become completely realized that year. I also realized that there is a limit on the time and energy a human being can devote to his or her job, and I began to understand why one of every two new teachers in California leaves the profession within the first three years.

Yet a phoenix did rise from the ashes of that first year. For teaching writing, I cling to the journal as something I knew I could make work. When the insecurity of not “covering the core curriculum” grabbed me, I took defensive forays into other means — vocabulary lists, a little grammar, a short answer test on a novel — but I found it virtually impossible to get every student to master the same content, learn the same skills, or stay on the same chapter of a novel at the same time. In other words, when I relied mainly on didactic teaching it inevitably turned into a test of wills over issues of study habits, behavior, or motivation. But most of my early attempts at cooperative learning situations and individual projects also failed because students had not built the trust, skills, or commitment needed to follow through. There had to be a way to build up the confidence to tackle more interesting and meaningful assignments.

I liked the idea of response groups, but they are actually complex social situations which are highly charged for insecure writers, thinkers and speakers. Students must be prepared carefully for such a task. In fact, it was that discovery — and that response group that erupted into a fist fight — that led me to a process I call journal partners, pairing students to learn the skills involved in writing and response in order to work up to the complexity of response groups incrementally.

I’ve learned to be more open in my writing. I used to be afraid to put my feelings on paper and on those rare occasions when I did I never let anyone see them. Now I can let my heart write what it feels and not be afraid of letting other people read it. I learned this from having journal partners and being in response groups. Having to share my work and getting responses on it and doing the same for someone else broke down my fear.

—from Kelley’s final journal self-evaluation, 1989
Initially it was pure practicality that led me to journal partners. I discovered that students wrote more and better when there was an immediate reward, an immediate audience. At first that audience was me, and they loved it when I read and responded to their work. But I could not keep hauling boxes of journals home every weekend, it was just too time consuming. And when I lagged on getting their journals back, or skimmed on response, the quality and quantity of the entries declined. I decided to have students read each other’s work so I could have a weekend or two to myself. As soon as I made that first step, I realized I had to teach students how to respond to each other. That meant modeling the process often, starting them off with simple positive content responses: I like the part where you say ___ because it shows __, and then showing how to point out problems by digging for meaning: When you wrote ___, did you mean __? 

I began working with pairs simply because it seemed like the lowest common denominator; it is easier and less threatening for students to work with one person, and a teacher can slowly build toward larger groups and more complicated tasks involving the skills of responding, discussing, analyzing, and cooperating. I have since learned that partnerships also teach cooperation, and that by varying partners and tasks the process is infinitely adaptable. However, journal partnerships seem to work best when used as a daily exercise which establishes a routine of writing and responding.

...I just needed that challenge of writing a page every day to make me write better. Now I feel like I can present ideas more clearly and see things that I do wrong more clearly as well, thanks to my journal partners.
—Leo’s journal self-evaluation, 1988

Here are my guidelines—not rules—for the journal partners process (10-20 minutes at the start of each period):

The expectations for students:
• Write for the entire allotted time.
• It is preferred that you try to write on the topic, but if nothing comes you may select your own topic.
• If nothing still comes, continue to write the last word you wrote over and over again until something does come (expect to get pages of one word at first—eventually even the most reluctant writer thinks of something to say).
• Reading and response is required, but you have the right to pass if your writing is too personal to share.
• Grading is based on volume and your commitment to the process.

The steps:
• The topic is introduced with some prewriting activity (Brainstorming, listening, seeing, reading, talking).
• Students write. The time varies, but usually it is from six to twelve minutes.
• Taking turns, they read their writings aloud to each other (this enables them to hear what their writing sounds like and review what they have written).
• Students exchange journals and respond in writing, often using a model phrase designed to help them be specific and constructive.
• Discuss the writing. What kind of writing is this? Audience? How could I revise it? What am I trying to say?

Optional steps:
• Students share writing with the whole class if appropriate.
• After students are accustomed to the process encourage them to target specific goals to help each other attain.

Often it is helpful to discuss the process. Ask the students about the topic or exercise. Was it difficult or easy? Did you feel inspired, or did you have to push through it? It’s O.K. not to do a perfect writing every time.

Students change journal partners every four to six weeks. This means that by the end of the year each one has worked closely with six or eight people. I find it makes other kinds of group work run smoother and promotes the kind of sharing necessary for honest peer and self-evaluation. The writing in the journal often is the raw material for other writings, and, at the end of the year, is material proof of a student’s progress and growth.

When students write every day they generate a lot of writing. It would be impossible for a teacher to read it all—that’s the point of having a daily response partner—but students often feel cheated if they don’t get “credit” for their work. They want to see their effort reflected in their grade. At some point the teacher has to read something and validate it with a grade. I have found that having students evaluate their own work and select only the very best journal entries for me to read is the way to go. It saves time and work for me, and encourages the students to make more of their own decisions about their writing. Three or four times per quarter I ask students to bring their journals to class for a self-evaluation. We discuss criteria beforehand and come to some agreement on what constitutes “commitment to the process.” They score their own journal, add up the points, and answer questions which ask them to look at their writing carefully and explain what they do best and what they need to work on.

With some classes the process begins to wear thin after about half a year. A variation I’ve used is to have students create their own journal exercises and present them to the class. Presenters then collect the journals and write responses to the authors in addition to what the partners write. This gives even more control to the students (and a lot more appreciation for

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Journal Partners

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eyour job as well!). It's also a chance for you to get a different perspective on your class, to let somebody else decide what is important. Your role changes in a positive way, allowing you to coach students in developing their own ideas.

Late in the year I let the students determine about half the journal writings either as a class or on their own, because I find students need me less and less as a source of writing inspiration. As in the writing that evolved from the fight, sometimes it's just a matter of being aware of what is at issue for students. Once students have found what interests them to read and write about, you can give them more responsibility in selecting their own assignments. Implicit in helping students find their worth and capacity as learners is giving them the opportunity to succeed at a level of challenge they determine for themselves.

Teddy was messin around & I didn't get no good responses. Then he got suspended and I didn't have a journal partner & you were absent & I couldn't ask you what to do so I didn't do what I was suppose to do and I didn't read aloud or get responses. So I got tired of that cause it wasn't helping me none so I got Karlesha to help me & she did.

—From Marco’s journal self-evaluation, 1989

Using journals as a source for writing and a training program for response, cooperation and evaluation has worked fairly well for me with students of all ability levels and especially with mixed ability groupings. More important for me, developing the journal partners process as a useful pedagogy led me to some important discoveries about what seems to help young people learn best. These discoveries have turned into a set of goals that have guided me as each year I sought to become a better teacher.

Provide opportunities for success:
Make it possible for reluctant learners to get a chance to use the skills and talents they do have to succeed. Though Willie was not a student of English, he was able to show Mi Ling some of the things he knew about the language. This made him feel competent and improved his general outlook toward writing.

Individualize the curriculum as much as possible:
The journal provides opportunities for students to pursue individual interests in a cooperative context, while learning the skills, knowledge, and understanding necessary to make a jump to the next level of achievement. Though the content of the journal is ultimately up to the student, the journal process weaves writing, reading, speaking, and listening into each day's lesson, and develops critical thinking and interpersonal skills as well. Just as Roger was encouraged by Arletha to read his writing to the class and ultimately to revise and polish it, students come to learn they are competing with nobody but themselves, and that producing something that demonstrates their progress is its own reward.

Emphasize honest self-evaluation:
Students should know what they know and what they don't. Teach skills in context. Promote goal setting. My experience has been that, when given the responsibility of evaluating their own work and the training to do so, students are honest.

Make the classroom a safe environment:
Just as learning demands honesty, honesty requires trust. Trust must be built carefully and cooperatively, with clear expectations that helping behaviors are desirable and that respect must be shown at all times. Terrell and Dusty knew what they had to do, and it took only questions to get them to choose to do it. Here's where the old timers were right: be tough about the things that count. Do not allow verbal abuse of any kind, and model the behavior you expect.

Encourage students to make meaning for themselves:
Question frequently and show an interest in what the students have to say. Teach them how to find their own answers, and use each other as a resource. The zeal with which Alia and Regina approached their sharing seemed mostly based on their desire to communicate to each other, to make meaning. What they said to each other became important whether the teacher graded it or not.

Expect students to achieve:
This can be harder than it sounds, but keep the door open to surprises, and just make sure students know what is expected of them. I am convinced that, at least in part, Dusty and Terrell learned to work together because I expected them to do so.

In the end, the journal process I use is not so complicated. It is based on the simple assumption that all humans do want to make sense out of their experience in this world and will rely on whatever talents, capacities, or strategies they have to do so; it is only the perceptions that they and others hold about their ability and their worth as human beings that gets in the way. Our task as teachers is to "clear the way," to provide students with the challenge, respect and support to take charge of their learning process and to make decisions about what they need to learn next.

...one thing I learned that I will probably remember most from this year is if you don't want to write something, because it's boring, then you shouldn't. Because, if you think it's boring, then how do you think the reader will like it? Just skip it...write something else...

—Glenn's final journal self-evaluation, 1989