

Literacy Leads

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Daybooks are NOT Diaries
But they can be a powerful, discovery tool



Some pages in daybooks (writer's notebooks) are easy to explain. Teachers and students readily understand the note-taking part and the gluing-in-the-handouts part. They willingly experiment with reader response, partner-journal writing, and double-entry journals. Kids keep topic pages and Table of Contents and vocabulary pages. Students fill the pages with writing. Teachers and students get that part, the assignment part.

The part that teachers – and students – seem most confused about is the differentiation piece, the pages in the daybook that are unique to the writer. Teachers share their reluctance for allowing kids private space in their daybooks: determining their personal daybook set up, the order they use the pages, and choosing what to write about. Students complain that they don't know what to write about; some teachers and students are convinced that teachers must supply the topics. I guess in time-squeezed schedules, we miss the point of thoughtfully laying the foundation for student ownership. However, that's the crucial key to development as writers and that's why devoting pages to "unassigned parts" is so important.

This next story might further illustrate the part about daybooks I find so hard to explain.

I sat at a restaurant patio one summer evening with a group of teachers. They'd read *Thinking Out Loud on Paper*, a book six of us with the UNC-Charlotte Writing Project co-authored. The teachers wanted to implement daybooks in their classrooms. They peppered me with questions for two hours. From listening to what they had to say, I realized we defined daybooks differently. They asked questions

like how am I going to make sure the kids number their pages? How do I know the students will go in order? How can I make sure they're doing the assigned writing in there? How will I grade the notebooks? While their questions were meaningful, I thought about questions that were missing from the conversation. They weren't asking questions about how to foster a culture of thinking or how to help writers who are perfectionists or how to help students find their voices. With each question, I found myself trying to explain how writing in daybooks is unlike school assignments of the past.

Finally, as darkness settled around us, I asked, "What are you writing?" I searched each face. At first they were silent, but eventually, one by one, they said, "Nothing."
"Yes, you are," I insisted. "Or, you could be." As we talked further, one woman shared that she was writing papers for her master's degree.

"Then, what would be in her daybook?" I asked the others. More silence. "Probably data to support the main ideas of her papers," I suggested.

I then explained, if she heard relevant facts when watching television, or if she read something in the newspaper or a text, if she overheard someone talking, or if her professor mentioned some pertinent tidbit, she would write these scraps down. Over time, the scraps would form categories. The details would form patterns, generalizations and conclusions. Her paper would take shape. Over time, she would collect what she needed for her classes, not knowing how all the strings would tie together. Knowing that the pieces were important and understanding that some would end up in

the final tapestry would make daybook collecting useful and important.

My explanation frustrated one of the teachers. “My mother has cancer and she’s trying to keep a daybook. She hates it. She doesn’t want to read it and remember how bad she felt.”

“A daybook is not a diary; it is a problem-solving, discovery tool,” I responded. “If your mother was keeping a daybook, she would be collecting recipes that make her feel better. She would glue in inspirational articles that she wants to read over and over. She might write down what made her feel better and what made her feel worse. She could record her weight to see if she’s losing or gaining. She’d use writing to try to make sense of what was happening to her or gain some control over the situation. A daybook is different. It is a way of collecting information to help her learn to conquer cancer hopefully or at least feel better.”

Another teacher wanted to write stories for her children. Her family loves telling stories but none were written down. Since she thought she had to write a whole story in one sitting, she hadn’t gotten very far. But what if she wrote a few minutes each day? One year I wrote 2 pages a week and at the end of the year, I had a book. That’s also what a daybook can be used for... to write just a little every day and then turn those little entries into meaningful “somethings” when we have longer blocks of time in which to work.

The conversation on the restaurant patio mirrors the confusion over daybooks that I hear frequently from students and their teachers. What they describe aren’t daybooks at all, but journals or diaries or even seatwork to be gathered by teachers and graded.

Many adults use a form of daybook, though they rarely call them that. DaVinci used notebooks to design airplanes. My husband, a journalist, uses reporter’s pads to gather information. My brother, a chemical engineer, records data in field journals as he and his associates experiment with fuel cells. My son, an artist, draws his ideas in sketch journals.

What we have in every case is not the polished, final work but the groundwork, the thinking, the foundation of that work. Daybooks should be just as essential to student learning and discovery.

Here are five principles teachers need to accept about daybooks or writer’s notebooks to unleash their power as a catalyst for creative thinking.

1. **Daybooks are stepping-stones to final, published works.** Hardly anything in the daybook is perfect or worth grading. In truth, they’re a messy looking jumble of entries. It’s only when the writing is selected to become a final product that it comes out of the daybook and onto the computer or notebook paper. Then students get feedback and make changes before the final, “perfect-as-can-be” product that is due (and is worth grading). Meanwhile, the writer has used the daybook for brainstorming ideas and rough drafts. Or, she wrote her way into an understanding of what she wanted. Meanwhile, her daybook is growing fat.
2. **Students create space in the daybook for themselves.** The kids write badly, skip pages, draw, write their novels, write about anything they wouldn’t mind sharing, write at the back, scribble and doodle. Choosing their own projects entices them to fill the pages. Showing off their inventions encourages them to create again. Daybook writing is more practice than end product. When I’m learning something new, I’m pretty ungainly as well. For example, I stumble when learning new software. I have to read a little, play a little, skip to the easy parts, and use that lovely edit-undo button a lot. New writers will, too and they need the pages and time and permission to handle their daybook decisions so they find their writing legs.
3. **Playing is a big part of daybooks.** From messing around as children, we got into trouble and had to figure our way out. Mistakes forced us to problem solve. Thinking our way out of trouble

taught us to trust our instincts. From play, we gained confidence and wisdom. The daybook is the perfect place to make those mistakes, get back up, and try again. Daybooks will be messy because rarely is our first idea our best idea. We need to cross out and rethink.

From playing, looking from different perspectives, sharing, and revising, writers form workable ideas. This kind of thinking is ambiguous and disordered and difficult to grade. It's okay though because the only consequence of running out of pages is being forced to buy a new daybook. However, the consequence of not playing is stifled imaginations. Playing is one way we jump students over the hurdle and move them toward working. Furthermore, we don't grade the playing. The students, together with their teacher, judge the final products and the process that brought them to the end.

4. **Students and teachers talk regularly about what works and what needs work.** It's all in the language we use: "Has anyone found another way to keep track of pages besides the Table of Contents that's working for them? Please share!" Asking for input in this way clearly demonstrates that we value students' ingenuity. Asking students to share how they decided what to write for homework and charting their decisions models for others how to find topics while affirming the child who explained. Asking students what's hard about keeping daybooks, commiserating along with them, brainstorming solutions, evaluating, and then trying new ideas let's kids in on a secret: all writers struggle. The daybook slowly becomes theirs, not ours, when we work through the challenges by soliciting solutions from the students.
5. **Teachers encourage students to assess their own work.** Collecting reflections makes daybooks different. Using daybooks is a part of a rigorous classroom that fosters self-assessment

and personal goal setting. The beauty of the daybook is that the child's thinking and discoveries are recorded for them to look back, reread, reuse, revise, and remember. Rereading daybooks is a perfect "thinkwork/seatwork" assignment worthy of encouragement. When writers examine their initial work, write reflective essays, keep track of assignments, and set goals for the next unit of time, learning grows. Where else do you see day-to-day metacognition but in a daybook?

As is often the case, the five principles came to me after the patio conversation. My friends and I did, however, reach an understanding that evening that a daybook is a tool to help students capture their thinking on their way to learning something. Each daybook is different depending on the students' goals. Even the look, the structure, of each daybook will be different depending on the learning style of the student. Once it is meaningful and purposeful to our kids, confusion about how to keep a daybook will fall away. The students just know what they need to collect.

The teachers left excited that daybooks aren't perfect, grade-able books. Best of all, we discussed what they could write in their own daybooks and how important it is for them to have a project of their own to work on. They left energized by the writing they planned to do.

Come to think of it, that is the sixth step that teachers need to take to understand the power of daybooks – maintain one themselves. My discovery will be added to my daybook and will show up in future articles.