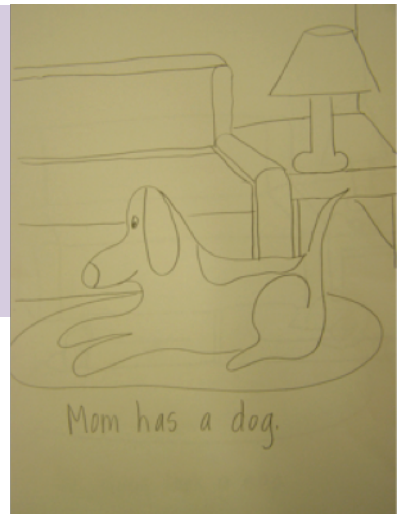


# Literacy Leads

Material Decisions, November 4, 2009  
Karen Haag



## Collaboration Corner

I just wanted to share with you what's going on in my class right now...it's by far the best "exam" I think I've ever administered. My students have been working so diligently on everything in their daybooks all quarter that I found it only fitting to have a "Daybook Check" as my exam. I approached my principal with this idea, and he said to go for it, so today is the day. My kids, armed with Post-it notes, daybooks, highlighters, scissors, glue, and my very few guidelines, are having their "daybook conversations" with me. They are marking things they understand so well that they could teach someone else, things that they need more help with, etc., and then reflecting in no less than a page. My students have written page upon page for their reflections, and they have used Post-its throughout the daybook as mini-reflections/notes to me. I've previewed some from my first and second blocks, and they are truly amazing. Let's just say I'll be doing a lot of reading and writing myself over the Thursday and Friday teacher workdays! I had only allotted 45 minutes for these "exams," but my students have taken the entire class period. I love it! Today is definitely a day in my teaching career that I will never forget!

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## Material Decisions

Ever had to learn a lesson more than once? I don't know how many times I will figure out this promise to myself, but once again this month, I re-learned to reflect on the model I set for who does the thinking in our classroom.

I wanted first-grade writers to realize they could write booklets instead of single-page stories. To get them started thinking, I began by telling a story about my mother-in-law's dog, Andy. Andy is a Springer Spaniel. Need I say more? He's a high-energy breed and weighs about 100 pounds, so he gets away with murder.

In this case, my husband took off his glasses, placed them on the table in the living room, and took a nap. Andy grabbed the glasses and held them, ever so softly, in his mouth while my husband slept. When my husband woke up a battle of wills to get the glasses back ensued. My husband is smarter and eventually won them back, albeit with a tiny tooth puncture in the left lens.

I told the story first-grade style with plenty of suspense. Then I held up a page with a picture I'd drawn of Andy (see above). I'd written one sentence at the bottom: Mom has a dog. "Does this tell the whole story?" I asked? "No!" came the choral reply, which led into a discussion of how books have many pages. My story definitely needed more pages we decided. So, I drafted 4 more as the young ones watched.

I asked a child to model before I turned them loose to try this idea on their own. I held up a pre-stapled booklet of 5 pages for my writer to use. (My mistake; more about that later.)

He told his story like this, "My dog pooped on the bed."

"Is that what happened first?" I probed.

He told me, "No. He jumped on the bed."

I asked him, "Who jumped on the bed?"

When he told me, I asked, "Okay, so how could you start your writing? I started my story by telling people that mom had dog. Do you think you might tell us that you have a dog like I did?" He thought that would make a good first page. When I asked him what he would write on his second page, he said that he thought writing that the dog jumped on the bed would be good. Then on the third page he would write that the dog pooped on the bed. When I asked him, "Then what?" he said his mom got mad. He thought that would make a good fourth page. I asked him how he would like to end the story and he thought his mom getting mad was a good ending and that he was done.

I turned to the class. "He has 5 pages in this booklet. Does he need to use all 5 pages?"

"Yes!" came the choral reply.

"NO!" I told them. "You are the author and you get to decide!" As first graders do, they giggled probably wondering why they had 5-page booklets then (the little smarties)!

Upon reflection with the teachers who watched this demonstration, I wondered aloud how many decisions we make for children. We try to make their lives easier by having the booklets ready, but are we really preparing them for life or for the moment?

I then shared the story of the state math test I administered. The fifth-grade students in my care needed read aloud as a test modification. For this test, each child was given a ruler and a protractor, a piece of scrap paper and a calculator. Because I was reading the test, I was able to watch the children at work. We came across a confusing problem; the students

were directed to find the perimeter of a rectangle whose sides were measured already and clearly labeled. Almost every child picked up the ruler and started measuring the sides any way. Then the questions started which, of course, I couldn't answer; "When I measure the side of this rectangle, the measurement I get doesn't match the test booklet. What do I do?"

Painfully, I watched them work through the rest of the test, unsure of what tool to use when.

I decided that day that I would not set out supplies for children. By preparing the materials ahead of time, even by placing what they needed for the task on their desks, I crippled their decision-making skills. Once alone to decide, the students who struggled the most were lost. Instead, I would make sure all resources were accessible in the room, but that the students would decide what to use. Selecting the correct tools would be part of the lesson and reflection.

So why did I ask the teacher to make booklets with 5 pages? Because the book I was reading suggested to, I didn't think it through thoroughly, and I'd already forgotten my promise to myself.

How often do we set out the materials for math lessons, science experiments and social studies projects in our effort to help our students and streamline our busy schedules? How many times will I have to re-learn my lesson?

It's so much better to have a paper center with lots of different sizes and colors of paper, lines and no lines. Students need practice even in this problem-solving skill: CHOOSING how many pages they need for their books. This idea is simple, easy to implement and has a HUGE impact no matter the subject area or grade level.

By the way, we also had a lot of poop stories that day. *Note to Self:* Don't let a child model a poop story.