Collaboration and cooperation: Developing collegiality through a project involving dialogue journals and the use of technology

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There is a need for tertiary institutions to work cooperatively and collaboratively with school personnel. The benefits to school personnel include being involved in actively raising educational attainment, and professional development. The benefits to tertiary education personnel include an assurance of research impacting at the practical level, and an opportunity to add to the body of knowledge in teaching. This paper describes a collaborative project in which the writer worked with school personnel. An Action Research project was developed and implemented with good results. The project aimed at assessing the potential of fax interchanges to improve the expressive writing of Deaf adults. The researchers also operated as grassroots tutors as an inherent part of the project. The factors that led to successful completion of the task are discussed.

Summary
This research project aimed to determine the effect dialogue journals and facsimile machines would have on developing the expressive writing skills of four congenitally, profoundly deaf adults, two male and two female. The assessment tool was a modified five level version of The Descriptive Criteria for Narrative Writing (Adler, 1987). Three of the participants showed significant improvements in expressive writing skills through this distance education method. Collaboration factors emerged during the project.

Project Rationale
Many Deaf learners leave the education system with immature writing skills. These learners come from a variety of educational settings. Language acquisition is greatly impeded by deafness (Mogford, 1988, Quigley, 1977) and for some this is reflected in their underdeveloped literacy skills despite intensive input. (Conrad, 1979, Brooks, 1978, Reich & Reich, 1974).

Although some Deaf adults have found assistance through the Adult Reading Assistance Scheme, (Adult Reading Learning Assistance) those whose speech is not readily understood have been unable to use this agency. There appeared to be a lack of appropriate provision for this particular group.

Approaches have been made to various agencies, over the last few years by Deaf adults inquiring about Deaf Adult Literacy Programmes. Australian research among the Deaf adult population had found that the majority of Deaf adults wished to participate in second chance education programmes. However, they preferred individual lessons, in their choice of communication mode and preferably in their own homes (Cresdee, 1990).
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Deaf adults have highlighted the difficulties of travel from outer suburbs and the set time constraints of courses. Fax machines eliminate the need for travel and allow for work periods to suit the individual on a frequent, regular basis. The use of faxes as a distant teaming mode needed consideration as fax communication is becoming an important mode of communication amongst the Deaf Community. Telecommunicators (T.T.s) are not as suitable because they do not allow enough time for reflection before responding. Other advantages of using a fax are the opportunity to use a variety of font style and size; text features such as bold type, italics, underlining; and a range of layouts. Fax communications are personal and allow time for each writer to work at their own pace. Writers can have breaks if and when needed, reflect on the tutor's model, self edit and use graphics to clarify messages. They give tutors a means of working at each individual's level, using material that is personal and interesting to the participant. Faxes also allow tutors to use a variety of strategies on an individual basis. Faxes can be exchanged twenty four hours a day at each participant's convenience. There is no call charge within the local calling area. Learners do not require transport to participate. The increasing popularity in the use of faxes has expanded telecommunication access for Deaf adults to homes, businesses, schools and service agencies. This has highlighted the need for developing expressive writing skills.

"Expressive Writing is like transcribed speech, reflecting the ebb and flow of the writer's thoughts and feelings. It is characterised by its spontaneous, personal approach, seen for example in journals or learning logs." (Ministry of Education, 1993).

Using Dialogue Fax Journals to Improve Expressive Writing Skills

In this study Dialogue Fax Journals (DFJS) are defined as an interactive exchange of faxed personal writing. The tutor provided models of correct content, form and use of language as defined by Bloom & Lahey, (1978). These were taken from the learner's writing for the learner to reflect on, and compare.

Dialogue Journals in book form have been used with hearing children, ESOL students and deaf children for a number of years. They are based on the knowledge that the natural acquisition of language is dependent on interaction with others (Goodman, 1972, Smith, 1983). "The easy conversational flow of the dialogue journals makes it possible for students to communicate successfully with more experienced users of written language." (Bailes, Serals, Slobodzian, Staton, 1986).

A feature of dialogue journals is that they are never marked or corrected. The student acquires language through the model presented by the more experienced user. Some experienced users also model correct forms of identified errors in the learners' writing. In this
study modelling was identified as a major strategy to encourage the adults to become independent learners. A variety of dialogue journal projects have been researched in the last ten years. These studies have focused on language acquisition developed through functional, interactive use between two consistent partners. There has been little research on the effect of correct modelling to counteract identified errors. Our aim was to address the interest and ability level of the learner while allowing the flexibility to focus on individual needs through DFJS. Dialogue Journals have been shown to be an effective way of improving the quality of Deaf adolescents’ writing, (Pritchett, 1989, Kluwein & Kelly, 1989). Whether or not they are effective when used with Deaf adults has not been published. In this study we investigated whether DFJS would be effective as a distance education method of developing expressive writing skills in Deaf adults.

Method
Four Deaf adults, two male and two female, expressed interest in participating in the project. Telecom N.Z. agreed to provide three fax machines for the six month period of the project. One subject had a fax machine. Each subject was visited at their home, at a mutually suitable time, where the project and method of instruction was fully discussed. A contract specifying the frequency of response, and duration of the project, was agreed upon and signed by tutors and learners. The loan of fax machines provided by Telecom N.Z. was contingent upon continued participation in the project. There was to be no instructional communication during the project, except by fax.

Subjects were given files with plastic pocket pages to keep a record of all communication. The subjects were asked to keep the tutors' responses on each left hand side page for ease of reflection of the modelling strategy. It was stressed that records must be in chronological order with tutor and learners' communications alternating regardless of length. Plastic pocket files were chosen for ease of storage thus eliminating glue, staples, etc. A roll of fax paper was provided for each participant by Telecom. N.Z. Literacy Profiles were completed by the subjects. These surveyed subjects' interests, hobbies, favourite TV programmes, pets, families, important events, employment, attitudes to reading and writing, library use, and reasons for wanting to improve literacy skills. Each subject was required to write a fax to the tutors at the Christchurch College of Education. Each fax was responded to individually by the tutors. When components of language content, form or use were modelled back to a subject, this model was underlined, initially. In the third communication this strategy was replaced with bold type to allow it to stand out from the surrounding print. In addition to the natural dialogues, three participants requested additional assistance through their faxes. One participant requested exercises to supplement the dialogue. These were provided using errors
from the subject's writing in specific exercises. e.g. Find the verb tense mistake in each sentence and correct it. Last week I was busying working in Washington. One participant requested definitions of words encountered in a handbook of a group the subject belonged to e.g. confession, confidence. One participant included questions about employment related assignments and faxed draft copies for our comment. At the completion of the study each subject was visited in their own home to discuss and evaluate the project. A questionnaire was discussed and filled out by the subjects. The questionnaire repeated the survey of attitudes to reading and writing and asked whether they thought their reading and/or writing had improved. They were then asked what factors had helped them; what other material had been read or written throughout the six months and what process they had used in reflecting. The participants were presented with Certificates of Participation at the conclusion of the research.

Subjects
Four subjects participated in the project. They were all prelingual, profoundly deaf. They ranged in age from mid twenty to fifty. They were all currently in a variety of manual to professional full time jobs. All the subjects had expressed a need to improve their literacy skills. Educational backgrounds were varied. One had been fully mainstreamed as the only Deaf person in a regular class. One had been in a resource class with other Deaf students attached to a regular school and the other two had been in both resource classes and at a School for Deaf.
Communication mode also varied. Two used New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL), one used speechreading and some signs/gestures and one used speechreading, audition and speech with some use of NZSL.

Results
Baseline data was obtained from the initial two faxes to compare with the final two faxes from each subject. These were analysed independently by the three tutors involved with the project. This triangulation confirmed the reliability of the assessments in each area, and demonstrated the appropriateness of the assessment tool.
The assessment tool was researched and developed by Carol Adler (1987) for narrative writing of nine to twelve year olds. Modification was necessary to take into account the genre of the DFJ’s and to measure the specific areas of difficulty that Deaf writers encounter. The expressive writing of each DFJ was analysed according to six distinct descriptive categories.
The categories used were:

- Organisation
- Format;
- transitions; paragraphing;
- Development of Ideas
- Sequence; idea expansion; fluency;
- Coherence, transition between sentences
- Clarity
- Variety and precision of word;
- subject/verb agreement; verb tense consistency; consideration of audience
Punctuation, Capitals. End markers; commas; apostrophes; quotation marks; capitals.
Sentence Structure Syntax; sentence variety; run-on sentences; sentence fragments.
Reflective Process Reflection; topic maintenance; self-editing.

Three categories, spelling, impact on reader and handwriting, were omitted from Adler's original eight categories. Initial analysis indicated that spelling errors were not a major feature of the DFJ responses and the handwriting category was not appropriate. Impact on reader was more appropriate for narrative prose. An extra category was added to recognise reflection as a major component of the DFJ process. Measurement of reflection commenced after the baseline for other categories was established.

Subject One
Baseline data indicated performance at the low-middle level for organisation, development of ideas, clarity, sentence structure and punctuation and capitals. Post treatment assessment showed a movement up one level to middle in all categories, except the development of ideas which remained at low-middle.
Twenty four faxes were received during the nineteen weeks of the project, an average of more than one a week. The first communication requested clarification of concepts and vocabulary for a professional development course assignment. The subject also faxed a draft of an assignment for us to comment on.
The subject's initial fax was not addressed to the researchers nor did it have any greeting or closure. The fax began with I'm studying for...... At the conclusion of the study the subject began the faxes with Hi Sue and Pat or Dear Sue and Pat.
The subject's initial expressive language was stilted and formal e.g. I would like ask you, while at the end of the study it became more colloquial and expressive, e.g. Yes, be lovely to see you both.
At the post treatment interview this subject described a systematic approach to reflection. Other evaluation comments were the bold type was good because it jumped out at you. This subject said it would be helpful to have face to face explanations at times and preferred written text without graphics. If attempts to understand the text failed, the use of graphics was acceptable.

Subject Two
Baseline data indicated performance at the middle-high level for organisation, clarity, punctuation and capitals and sentence structure. Development of ideas was assessed at the middle level. Three categories: organisation, clarity, punctuation and capitals moved two levels to high. No shift in level was observed in the sentence structure category. Twenty faxes were received from this subject, an average of one a week. The subject's initial faxes did not flow smoothly, e.g. We chatted along each other and good time to eat the enormous meal. Faxes at the end of the study showed more fluency, e.g.
No my Dad wasn't nervous about giving a speech at my brother's 21st party. At the post treatment interview this subject described an approach to reflection where the subject compared the two scripts on receipt of the tutors' response. Bold typed models were compared with the original script and highlighted in both scripts. However, no other reflection was undertaken prior to the subject's next writing which was several days later. Subject two did not proof read any writing before faxing it. After six faxes, at the learner's request, specific exercises were developed from examples of errors in the writing, and included in each tutors' response. Generalisation of this knowledge was not evident in subsequent writing. This may have been partly attributed to the subject's reflection process. The subject believed that a checklist for the reflection process would be of great assistance. The subject asked for sheets of grammatical rules with examples of their use to support and aid learning. At the post treatment interview, the subject suggested that repetition of examples and rules on follow up faxes would enhance this process. Subject two wanted to continue the project at the start of the next academic year and thought writing a much briefer fax on a more regular basis would lead to less procrastination. Subject Three Baseline data indicated performance at the low level in all categories. Post treatment assessment showed an upwards move of two levels, to the middle level, for organisation, development of ideas, clarity, punctuation and capitals. A movement of one level to middle-low for sentence structure was evident. Thirty seven faxes were received from this subject. This subject made the most significant progress. Initial faxed communication was stiff and formal, e.g. Good morning teaches. At the conclusion of the study greetings were appropriate, e.g. Hi Pat and Sue. Initial correspondence was low level, e.g. my write the all Thank you writing help me. Afternoon 2 Lady visit me for learn read, words, and writing. Examples from the final faxes showed considerable improvement, e.g. On Saturday morning I went to see my sister's Elaine place at Egmonton for cup of tea. After tea, Dora and I went for a walk with dog at Doogan Park. Can a family member buy fax $499.00? At the post treatment interview this subject described reflection as comparing faxes after receiving them and during writing the next fax. There was consistent evidence of self-editing in all faxes from this subject. This subject stated that face to face explanations on a regular basis would enhance the DFJS. In the later stages of the project, the subject's partner was thrilled to receive the first error free fax at work from this participant. Subject Four Baseline and post treatment data indicated no movement in any category, except in the development of ideas. In his initial fax his ideas were a chronology of events. e.g. Eeveryday from worrk have tea. Examples
from the final faxes showed empathy and conjecture, more advanced levels of cognition. I feel big sad for deaf people. Talk deaf culture about medic, culture. Two different view. This development is unlikely to have been caused by the DFJ process. It is possibly a reflection of a more stimulating work environment. The total number of faxes received in the nineteen weeks was eight. Lack of reflection was a significant feature in this subject's work, as confirmed by the subject. A strategy of writing the English model under this subject’s written form of New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) was used in the last two responses in an attempt to provide better links of concepts to the English language and increase motivation through recognition of this form of NZSL. However, no further faxes were received.

Project Conclusion
After a relatively short period of nineteen weeks, results were very encouraging. Ideally a programme would run at least for an academic year. Three of the four subjects made considerable progress. An upward shift of one or more levels was realised in thirteen out of fifteen categories for the first three subjects. In the sixth category of Reflection it was not possible to obtain baseline data to compare with post treatment data. However, there was immediate evidence of reflection once the research commenced. For example surface features: greetings, paragraphs and salutations, were quickly reflected. With some subjects, upward shifts in the punctuation category were achieved through Direct Instruction (e.g. Use capital letters at the beginning of every sentence. Put the apostrophe between the I and m for I'm). Repetitive modelling was usually necessary to achieve correct usage of the more complex aspects of language. However, in some cases it occurred immediately. e.g. ... as I really liked to the exercises to keep my mind going and think hard etc. The tutors modelled back You obviously need a challenge to keep your mind sharp! In the next fax the subject responded; Great that you suggested that I need a challenge to keep my mind sharp!!

The first three subjects achieved middle level in the Reflection category. They varied in the strategies they used for reflecting, indicating a need for systematic instruction in this process. Subject four did not demonstrate reflection strategies at all. Infrequent correspondence by subject four lead to virtually no measurable progress in any category. It seems unlikely that the DFJ would have much impact as a method of developing expressive writing unless responses were regular. Frequent communication is crucial to achieve measurable positive change. All participants concluded that shorter communications, would encourage them to write more regularly. Many suggestions were made by the participants at the post treatment interviews. Overall, the rating scale of attitude indicated that
subjects had shown sustained interest and positive attitudes towards literacy for the duration of the project. They were eager to continue with this project. At the start of the research they had all stated that they wanted to improve in general terms. At the end of the research they had more personal specific writing goals. Upward shifts in thirteen out of fifteen categories is substantial evidence that the DFJ method has validity as a method for improving Deaf adult’s expressive writing skills.

Emergent Collaboration

Background

In the late 80's tertiary institutions began to consider the advantages of working collaboratively with schools, and school personnel. There are definite advantages to all parties. (Hill & Pope 1995). The benefits to school personnel include being involved in actively raising educational attainment, and professional development. The benefits to tertiary education personnel include an assurance of research impacting at the practical level, and an opportunity to add to the body of knowledge in teaching. These benefits are felt if involved parties are:

Working jointly to facilitate growth
Sharing
Trusting
Supporting each other
Making collaboration central to daily life (Fullan 1993).

Perhaps the beginnings of full collaboration are to be found in joint projects.

The Collaborative Process

The topic for this particular study arose from the personal interests of team members, and their awareness of the need, for developing ways of helping Deaf adults raise their literacy level. Within this major need, a whole raft of minor needs emerged. As discussed in the main project, for example, there was a need for transport to reach evening classes. There was a need to learn within time constraints. The need for privacy about personal literacy levels. The need to work at individual levels. The need for funding for fax machines.

During the planning stage, a number of possible solutions were generated. For example, the use of telecommunicators (T.T.s) Methods of instruction such as direct instruction. Methods for researching learning techniques. This was followed by selection of solutions that would best meet the needs of all parties. The next steps of implementing and evaluating, were intensive periods of collaboration for the research team members. Reflection and revision constantly took place, and when face to face contact became difficult, we used the system we intended to use with our subjects - faxes. The best collaboration took place at a single computer terminal, when all three team members would contribute to planning outlines and write-ups. Team members took individual responsibility for writing specific parts of the research, these contributions were then discussed at regular
meetings. In general team members wrote the components they felt most knowledgeable about. Again review was invariably carried out on the computer screen, when team members would edit and re-edit each others contributions until all members were satisfied with the results. The process was formative, as the research was written, the data was collected.

Characteristics of the Collaboration in the Project

Perhaps the most significant factor in this study was its grassroots creation. The project title grew from the teachers, and the Deaf community.

It was a product of the combined interests of the group.

An equally important factor was the research milieu in which the project was generated. There is a great need for research in the topic of Deaf people and writing.

Alongside of this, is the traditional pragmatists view that research should make a contribution at the practical level, i.e. the results should be immediately and directly applicable.

Action research is highly motivating. When practitioners feel that they are creating an improvement in teaching it is meaningful. There is ownership, the project belongs to the team members. They do not feel that they have had the research thrust upon them.

Factors that seem to encourage Collegiality

Ownership of the project through genuine self selection of topic
Selection of a socially and educationally significant project ("We are going to make an impact").
Collaborative sharing of the workload.
Consistent and intensive group consultation.
Individual responsibility.
Clearly set parameters established by collaboration
The nature of the project caused natural collaboration with the subjects
References

(ERIC)

Group recommendations
A checklist to aid the reflective process would be an additional resource that should improve the process of reflection.
Face to face contact on a request basis.
Supply of books/magazines at the appropriate reading level, to provide immersion in reading.
Encourage the use of Teletext and captioned videos.
More accurate meeting of needs could be achieved by working out and sharing targets in conjunction with the subject.
A resource book on examples of difficult language structures.
Scan fax when it arrives.
Combination Dictionary/Thesaurus in each home.