



# Greater Good in Education

SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

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## Dialogue Journals to Build Trust and to Grow Students' SEL Skills

**Brief Overview:** Teachers and students write to each other in journals on a regular basis, helping to build positive teacher-student relationships and to grow students' self-awareness and social awareness.

*“Dialogue starts from the courageous willingness to know and be known by others. It is the painstaking and persistent effort to remove all obstacles that obscure our common humanity.”— Daisaku Ikeda*

**When You Might Use This Practice:**

- To build student-teacher rapport at the beginning of the year
- To provide a “safe space” for students to communicate their opinions, needs, and fears about academic or personal issues
- To encourage an alternative form of communication when face-to-face conversations are more challenging for students (e.g., introverted students or second language learners)

**Time Required:**

- 15 minutes to introduce the journals
- Ongoing journal writing time varies (see “Instructions” section below)

**Level:**

- High School

**Learning Objective:**

- Students will keep a dialogue journal with their teacher on an ongoing basis, writing about whatever academic or personal topic they wish.

**Materials:**

- One journal or notebook per student. (Teachers may also choose to share an online document or “journal” through Google or Dropbox.)

**SEL competencies:**

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management
- Social Awareness

- Relationship Skills
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## How to Do It:

### *Reflection before the practice:*

- Think of a teacher who took the time to get to know you as a person. How did this teacher make you feel? Did you see yourself (as a person or as a student) differently as a result of this connection?

### *Instructions:*

#### Introducing the journals:

- Discuss with students: *Think of a time when you received a message, text, letter, or card from someone who cares about you. It could be a caregiver or a family member, like a grandfather or aunt, or maybe a friend. How did it feel to receive that note?*
- Tell students: *I value each of you very much as both a student and as a person outside the classroom, so to help us get to know and understand each other better, each of you is going to receive a journal. You and I are going to be writing to each other. You can write to me about anything you like in this journal.*
- In pairs, small groups, or as a whole class, ask students to brainstorm possible topics for journal writing, such as academic subjects, classwork, peer relationships, school improvement, teachers, school activities, books, music, films, sports, weekend and home activities, or personal growth.
- Students may also choose to flesh out their topics list by generating a list of sample questions under each topic. What might they like to be asked and/or what questions would they like to ask their teacher?

#### Giving students their journals:

- Before handing out journals, give students the following guidelines [feel free to adjust these based on your students' abilities]:
  - Set a minimum length for letters. For example, a minimum of one to three paragraphs. [Note that it can take two to three months for students to become fluent with the dialogue writing process.]
  - Let students know that you will not be grading their entries or correcting their spelling or grammar. [Teachers often model correct spelling and grammar in their responses to students.]
  - Clarify that the content of the journal is private -- only you and the student can read the letters, unless permission is given otherwise.
- Give each student a journal and let them decorate the journal. [Online journals can feature images that students upload for the cover.]
- If possible, have students leave their journals in a special space at school in order to maintain privacy. (They may also have a private file folder online that they share only

with their teacher.)

- Set aside at least 20 minutes during class for students to read your responses and write a reply.

#### Responding to students' letters:

- Because responding to students' letters can take a lot of time, researchers make the following suggestions:
  - Respond to students once a week.
  - Choose one pre-existing group or create a new one by drawing names from a hat. Work with that group for no less than three weeks.
  - If you teach multiple classes, choose one class to write to at a time.
  - Get creative and do what works for you! The most important part is responding to students on a regular basis.
- Suggestions for responding to content:
  - Acknowledge students' topics and encourage them to elaborate on their interests.
  - Add new, relevant information about the topic at hand so your response is interesting to read; however, be careful not to over-respond.
  - Don't overwhelm students with emotions or advice.
  - Use positive reinforcement.
  - Avoid glib comments like "good idea" or "very interesting." This cuts off rather than promotes dialogue.
  - Take time to affirm and support each student.
  - Respond to the content without correcting spelling and usage. Instead, model correct spelling and usage.

#### Responding to sensitive topics:

- As the teacher-student relationship grows more trusting through the letters, students will be more likely to reveal their concerns--both academic and personal. *Validating students' emotions and experiences will not only help students feel safer and a greater sense of belonging in school, but will also help them to develop their self-awareness and social awareness—both key SEL skills.*
- Note that you have the option to consult with the school counselor or psychologist without sharing the actual journal entry or the student's name if an especially difficult situation arises.
- Psychologist [Dr. Mary Lynn Crow](#) makes the following suggestions for how to respond to sensitive material:
  - *Help students identify their feelings by clarifying or by providing helpful terminology.*
    - "The stomach ache and tight throat sound to me like you feel scared. When we're afraid, sometimes we can really feel it in our stomach, our chest, or in our throats. Are you feeling afraid because you think you aren't ready for the standardized test coming up? It's okay to feel nervous--sometimes a little nervousness can help you to focus even

more. What could you do to relieve some of the fear? What will make you feel more prepared?"

- *Accept and validate students' feelings; be empathetic.*
  - "It must hurt you a lot to have to listen to them argue."
- *Provide a link to normalcy and reality in situations when children don't recognize their own vulnerability.*
  - "Being treated in that way is wrong; you don't have to allow it to happen anymore. I can get you some help."
- *Self-disclose when appropriate.*
  - "I used to have a best friend, too, and I remember how lonely I felt when she moved away."
- *Encourage productive self-exploration.* Encouraging students to know themselves better helps them to move toward a greater sense of independence and self-sufficiency.
  - "Maybe you can tell me more about that next time."
- *Encourage problem-solving.* Post steps in the classroom: 1. Identify the problem; 2. List possible solutions; 3. Forecast consequences of possible solutions; 4. Pick the best solution; 5. Make action plans; 6. Just do it!
  - "What are some other things you could do when that happens?"
- *Use bibliotherapy,* or using literature to help students identify with others who have similar problems. The decision to read is left to the student. Know that the decision to read will not resolve problems.
  - "I have a book about a teen whose friend dies. It reminds me of what you're going through. I can get it for you Monday, if you'd like."
- *Identify and support the use of helpful people resources.* School counselors, nurses, principals, and others—the choice is left up to the student.
  - "Would you like to talk to the school counselor about your concerns for your sister?"
- *Communicate that the student is not alone.*
  - "Lots of other students are struggling with this, too. You aren't alone."
- *If it could help, suggest a private face-to-face discussion.*
  - "I'd like to talk to you more about this in person. How about today after school?"
  - "It took a lot of courage for you to tell me about that. How can I help? Please let me know."
- *Validate a student's personhood, as opposed to focusing exclusively on the behavior.*
  - "It's so nice to get this chance to know you better."

### *Reflection After the Practice:*

- Do you find that your relationships with students are improving after using the journals a few times? How?
- As time passes, do students demonstrate more self-awareness in their writing?

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## The Research Behind the Practice:

Several studies suggest that dialogue journals between teachers and students can help with classroom management, building rapport with students, and growing students' self-esteem and problem-solving abilities.

Academically, dialogue journals may increase students' motivation to write and also provide a space for students who may not be comfortable expressing themselves in class. For example, second language learners, newly-arrived immigrants, and more introverted students may be more likely to share their questions about academic content.

*Why does this matter?* Numerous studies show that the relationship between teachers and students is critical to both academic achievement and student well-being, yet building a trusting relationship with students can be difficult for numerous reasons. Demands placed on teachers and challenging student behavior are just two kinds of roadblocks. Dialogue journals offer both teachers and students a safe mechanism to get to know each other and build mutual regard.

In addition, dialogue journals may offer an alternate way for students to increase their self-awareness by allowing them to express and explore their emotions through writing. Building a collaborative relationship with teachers may also improve students' social awareness.

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