

Postcard Pals

By Karen Hogg



Introduction

The following authentic literacy lesson centered on the writing of a postcard and included an opportunity to teach and assess recognition of vocabulary associated with this type of text.

Class/Community Description

This lesson and formative assessments were conducted with a group of students in Grade One. This particular class was situated in an elementary school of 585 students, located in a suburb approximately 40 kilometers south of Vancouver. The school has 16 regular and 8 French-immersion classes. The grade levels taught range from Kindergarten to Grade Seven.

The school's community has a population of just over 52,000. Many different cultures are represented, including residents of Chinese, Filipino, Latin American and Arab descent. A large percentage of the residents are of Indo-Canadian origin. Approximately 20 percent of all residents have a first language other than English or French.

Data from the 2001 census revealed that over 80 percent of adults in this community, who are between the ages of 30 and 44, received an education at the professional trade, technical or university level. The same data also revealed the median household income to be \$66,303. The students from this particular school are largely of a lower to middle socio-economic status.

When developing and teaching this lesson, I had the unique experience of working with a group of only eight students. This was due to the fact that these children were part of a Kindergarten/Grade One classroom, where the students in Kindergarten attended for only the morning portion of the day. I was thrilled to be able to work with such a small group, as it provided me with time for individual assessment and teaching. I am, however, well aware that most classes have significantly more students. I am therefore including strategies that would allow the lessons and assessments to be used with larger groups.

Gathering Literacy Data

Earlier in the school year, I collected information about the community literacy practices for the children in the class. This consisted of taking careful note of any printed material that appeared in the surrounding neighborhood. It also involved conducting an informal classroom survey with students, as well as asking parents to complete and return a form indicating types of print that might be found in the home.

Examples of print in the community included signs found at bus stops and inside of buses, as well as numerous signs at a nearby shopping mall. Print could also be found in the form of restaurant menus and notices on bulletin boards. In addition, there were signs in front of a church, community center, public library, health services center and fire hall. Homes contained printed material such as advertisements, community newspapers, birthday cards, text on video games, and Yu-gi-oh or Pokemon cards. The teacher and I felt that postcards were an authentic form of text, because all of the surveys returned indicated that students were familiar with this type of print. As well, we felt that postcards could be used throughout the year to reinforce the notion of authenticity, since it was fairly common in this classroom for students to make long visits to India.

Pre-Assessments

I helped the teacher assess each student's knowledge of the genre of postcards in a one-on-one manner. The wonderfully small size of the group gave us more than enough time to conduct a thorough interview with each child. During "Center Time", we asked students to sit with us and let them have a look at several samples of postcards containing different messages. We then asked them to give a specific name for this particular form of text, and to answer two questions. For example, we asked "Sam" if he could think of a reason why someone might write a postcard, and if he could name things that a person might say when doing so. The teacher and I were attempting to see whether he recognized this specific type of text. As well, we wanted to know whether he had an understanding of the purpose for writing a postcard, and knowledge of the types of phrases one might use when composing text for it.

In addition to the two questions, we asked students to quickly read aloud a list of twenty words. This list contained vocabulary chosen because of its frequent appearance in postcards. For a complete list of these words, please refer to the textbox below. We

were attempting to see if the students could immediately recognize vocabulary that is often found both in postcards, and in texts used in the classroom.

Results of Pre-Assessments

Of the eight students who completed this assessment, all but two were able to give satisfactory answers to the questions. There was some inconsistency regarding the naming of a postcard. Five of the eight students said that it was either a letter or a special card. All students agreed that it was a form of text that they had seen delivered to and from their houses. Reflecting on printed material that they had seen in their homes, all students said that a postcard was an item to be received and read by someone else. None of the students was able to read the entire list of vocabulary, but six managed to decipher more than half of the words on the list.

Vocabulary Words				
Dear	I	who	what	when
to	am	miss	soon	is
how	fine	how	where	like
are	your	come	love	do
you	friend	back	it	good

Authentic Literacy Activity

The teacher and I designed an authentic literacy lesson and activity that involved students writing postcards to fellow classmates. This decision was based on the fact that, in this particular class, there were three students who had left to visit India for an extended period of time. A connection could thus be made between the text and its purpose.

The following day, we showed the students several samples of postcards, brought in by both the classroom teacher and myself. She and I were fortunate enough to be able to locate examples of postcards that had been sent to us, as well as ones that we had written to others. We began by examining the pictures on these cards, and noting that they contained scenery from different locations. We also noted that there was one

specific section on the back of each card allocated for the message, and another for the address.

We read the text of five different cards aloud, and together the group made a list of purposes for writing a postcard. These included inquiring about the wellbeing of a person who was far away, telling that same person s/he was missed and describing recent sightings and events. The reasons were listed orally, and then written on chart paper in the form of a question or declarative sentence. Items of punctuation, such as question and exclamation marks, were discussed and added where appropriate. The students were also asked to recall how each postcard message had begun with “Dear”, and had ended with either the word “From”, or the phrase “See You Soon!”. We then set the purpose for the lesson by discussing how we might communicate through writing a postcard with a classmate who was in India. The teacher explained that she had located the absent students’ addresses, which would allow us to mail these cards to them.

After reading the sentences written on the chart paper, I proceeded to display a collection of blank postcards. The students and I discussed how each card contained a photograph of an animal or landmark that was well known in Vancouver. I also showed them where a stamp would be affixed on the postcard, once the message and address had been written.

Based on the results of the pre-assessment indicating that the students were unfamiliar with words on the vocabulary list, the teacher and I made a decision to be the ones who would write the text of the postcard. We both felt that the students’ written messages might sound more authentic if the flow of writing were not interrupted by a struggle to write each word. The ultimate goal, of course, would be for students to be able to compose this text by themselves.

Students were individually asked to take a break from “Center Time”, and to sit with the teacher or me. They selected both a postcard, and the name of one of the three classmates in India. Once this was done, they began to dictate their message. I must confess that I found transcribing their words on to the postcard to be the most enjoyable component of the lesson. The students appeared to wholeheartedly embrace the act of sending news and greetings to a faraway friend. It was wonderful to witness the eagerness they displayed when conveying the sentiments “I miss you” or “Come back

soon”. It was quite moving to sense the excitement they felt when relaying the information that snow might actually arrive in time for Christmas. It was also interesting to hear many of the students share their own recollections of travels to India.

The students were reminded that most messages written on postcards started with the word “Dear”, followed by the receiver’s name. They were then allowed to select how they wished to draw their writing to a close. All chose to end their messages with the words “From”, or “Love”, and many asked to be able to sign their own names. The teacher and I made a point of being careful to read back to the students exactly what they had written. Our reason for doing so was to provide students with an opportunity to hear how written language differs from speech.

Embedded Skills Lesson

While the text was being dictated to us, there were occasions when the teacher and I felt compelled to “shape” some of its wording. For example, two of the students wanted to make the comment that morning in Canada occurs when it is night in India. Rather than allowing them to dictate only the sentence “It is morning.”, we asked that they be more specific and state “It is morning here in Canada.” Suggesting this change was our way of illustrating how written language, unlike speech, must rely less on the context of a situation. Writing differs significantly from speech in that it needs to include specific details.

The students had some trouble telling the difference between a question that was general in nature (e.g. “Do you like Barbies?”), and one that related specifically to the context of the writing on a postcard (e.g. “What is the weather like in India?”). The teacher and I often took the time to explain the difference to them. This form of direct teaching was meant to help illustrate the difference that exists between oral, conversational language and written text. Composing a written message is not the same as simply transferring spoken words on to paper. Written language uses both a different syntax and vocabulary (Purcell-Gates, 1988).

Post-Assessment

This portion of the activity occurred when I returned for a third time to the classroom. I presented the students with the postcards containing the text they had composed, and indicated that these were now ready to be mailed. Each child was given a

stamp, and then asked to place it in the appropriate corner of the card. We discussed the relationship between the price of a stamp, and the distance a postcard had to be sent. A walk to the mailbox was scheduled for later that day.

I proceeded to tell the students that I was very interested to see if they remembered any of the “Postcard Words” from the list of twenty they had been shown. I asked them to carefully observe the cards they had “written”. I then read aloud the list of words, requesting that the students listen and point to each word that could be found on their cards. These same words were written on the chalkboard, and organized into groupings or “families”.

During “Center Time” that same day, each student again met with the teacher, or me, and attempted to quickly read aloud the same list of vocabulary words. Of the six students who were originally able to read more than half of the words, two showed slight improvement. One of these students progressed from being able to read twelve words, to recognizing fourteen. The other went from reading eleven words to fifteen. Three students, who had previously recognized nothing on the list, were each able to read between one and five words. All of the students were now capable of correctly identifying a postcard. As well, they were able to accurately describe the type of wording and purpose associated with this text.

Perhaps the biggest implication of this assessment was that the writing of a postcard gave these students an understanding of how text can be created for an authentic purpose. It also gave them an opportunity to learn how words can create messages that will eventually be read by an audience other than the teacher. Another implication might be that some specific, direct teaching will continue to be necessary to help this group of students strengthen their level of vocabulary comprehension. The classroom teacher continued to work extremely hard to increase their phonemic awareness. Through the use of wordplay books, songs, etc., she strove to add to their understanding of rhyme and sound manipulation. She devoted a good portion of the Language Arts period to the direct teaching of phonics and spelling. As well, she provided many opportunities for the students to encounter high-frequency vocabulary, both on posters that are displayed throughout the classroom, and in texts that are available to be read.

Reflections

In order for a teacher working with a larger group of students of this age, to conduct the lesson and assessments, it would obviously be necessary to have help in the form of a classroom assistant or parent volunteer. Working together, the classroom teacher and I were able to complete each component of the lesson and assessments in segments of time lasting approximately fifteen minutes. A teacher working with a larger group could arrange for the one-on-one components to take place during three separate portions of the day. An individual student could sit with a teacher or assistant, while others completed learning center activities, read quietly or wrote in their journals. It is likely that, to accommodate more students, at least three days would be needed for the completion of these activities. It is also likely that, as students grew in their ability to write independently, less time would be necessary.

One way of shortening the post-assessment time, would be to give each student a sheet containing the twenty vocabulary words. Their job would be to cut out these words, and glue them on to another sheet of paper. They would be asked to do use as many of the words as possible to form sentences that resembled text from a postcard. Vocabulary comprehension could be determined, at least partially, by observing whether the students were able to place words in an appropriate order.

I believe that the act of composing text for a postcard allowed students to engage in writing that was both authentic and relevant. I also believe that the students' heightened understanding of a specific text and its purpose enabled them to gain more appreciation of how written words can extend well beyond the confines of a classroom!

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