

Transitioning From Narrative to Expository in the Middle School: A Look at Boys' Preferred Writing Techniques

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Abstract: Studies indicate that boys do not excel in writing to the same extent as girls. This study examined 6th grade boys' experiences progressing from writing personal narratives to expository responses. The study suggests that employing boys' preference for writing narratives may improve their writing proficiency.

Studies have identified the existence of a chasm between boys' and girls' writing dexterity (Kim, Al Otaiba, Wanzek, & Gatlin, 2015; Peterson & Parr, 2012; Smith & Wilhelm, 2009; Younger & Warrington, 2007). This includes being able to write effectively in multiple genres from narratives of experience to critical analysis of historical and contemporary social and political events. Repeatedly, and around the globe, girls have come out on top in this literacy (Farris, Werderich, Nelson, & Fuhler, 2009; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012; Peterson & Parr, 2012). This deviation begins as early as second grade (Kim et al., 2015). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2012), by the twelfth grade, 28% of boys score below the basic proficiency level in writing. This is twice as many as the number of girls. To produce advanced forms of composition, it is essential that students have the ability to implement different types of writing approaches. As children develop, their language matures and they are able to express themselves in different ways (Nippold, Hesketh, Duthie, & Mansfield, 2005). Sixth graders' thought processes, ideas about how they think of themselves and the world around them, is vastly different from even their previous year in elementary school (Schickedanz, Schickedanz, Forsyth, & Forsyth, 2001; Zins & Hooper, 2012). This includes an expansion on their ability not only to think abstractly, but also the ability to make connections that build upon their prior knowledge. Writing instruction mirrors this growth, preparing students with the simple narrative prior to introducing structured genres including expository writing. An additional rationale behind beginning with narrative writing is that beyond a writing style, narrative discourse also interplays with cognition. Research supports that among other positive attributes, sharing past and ongoing experiences aids children with their development of organizational skills in the areas of speaking and writing (Nelson, 1993).

Considering students are given the same instruction in writing, the discrepancy between girls' and boys' competence in composition writing may stem from sociological contexts (Newkirk, 2000). Engaging in advanced forms of writing composition involves taking on personas that may be different from the students' own including gender. For girls, this faculty may be viewed as a beneficial attribute of their prominence in writing. On the other hand, boys who face a more judgmental society may purposefully refrain from advancing in writing skills (Harrison, 2010; Millard, 1997). This could be due to the fact that in addition to skill, motivation and enjoyment also have an impact on improving writing abilities (Kim et al., 2015; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012; Nippold et al., 2005; Villalón, Mateos, & Cuevas, 2015). Students who enjoy writing, statistically score higher on writing tests (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012). Consequently, establishing the sort of writing boys deem enjoyable is of the utmost importance for the ELA community.

Even though numerous studies reveal girls outperform boys in this literacy, there is a dearth of research describing boys' experiences during their development of writing composition skills. It is therefore necessary to understand boys' writing experiences through their definition of expository writing and preference of writing style in order to be able to establish best practices in writing instruction. This study explored boys' knowledge of expository writing. The following questions: (a) How do 6th grade boys define expository writing? (b) How do 6th grade boys feel about themselves as writers? (c) With a choice between narrative and expository writing, which do 6th grade boys feel more comfortable with and why?

Method

This study is framed by the qualitative research methodology of phenomenology. Phenomenology involves understanding "several individuals' common or shared experiences of a phenomenon," (Creswell, 2013, p. 81). As such, this study sought to bring meaning to boys' experiences during the writing process in order to give insight to instructional practices that would contribute to boys' competency in writing composition.

A major component of trustworthiness is conducting an ethical study (Merriam, 2002a). In order to begin research, it was necessary to attain approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The scope and sequence of the study was disclosed to the participants. The participants' identities are confidential. The students were able to select pseudonyms to replace their actual names in the study. All of the participants consented to these conditions. Parents received notification forms.

Description of the Researcher

The researcher is an 11th year reading and English Language Arts (ELA) instructor at a middle school. She is currently a doctoral candidate at a university working towards a degree in Curriculum and Instruction of English. The researcher teaches ELA and reading courses to students in grades 6-8. Additionally, she has received accolades for her students' achievement on state writing assessments.

Participants and Setting

In a phenomenological study, the inquirer selects participants who "have all experienced the phenomenon," (Creswell, 2013, p. 83). The intent of the study was to provide a better understanding of boys' experiences progressing from narrative to expository writing. Therefore, all twenty students selected for the study were male. All the participants had the same ELA teacher and were in one of two classes.

The school is located in Florida. The school's enrollment is over 1,300 students. The school is culturally diverse: 40% of the students are Hispanic, 26% White, 6% Asian, and 2% identify as multi-racial. Enrollment in the free/reduced lunch program is below 30%. Students' proficiency and yearly academic gains are evaluated by the state's standardized assessment. The majority of the students, 87%, are proficient in reading and writing.

Data Collection

As part of monitoring my subjectivity, as a researcher, I reflected on my definition of expository writing and my expectations of male students' writing abilities. This was also in order to bracket my thoughts prior to beginning the study. Moustakas (1994) refers to bracketing as *Epoche*: "In the *Epoche*, we set aside our prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas of things," (p. 85). I wrote in a reflective journal after each focus group discussion. Merriam (2002a) offers that an additional application of the reflection journal is to enhance the trustworthiness of a study. As part of my process for collecting data, in addition to the reflection

journal, I frequently engaged in peer review with my colleagues during ELA PLC meetings. I also held focus groups and took writing samples.

Furr (2005) and Dyson and Freeman (1991) fervently argue that it is imperative that writing should be personal and meaningful for inexperienced writers. The students wrote responses to both fictive and non-fictive texts they read from their county approved *Interactive Reader and Writer* workbook (Allen et al., 2008). At the end of each selection, the workbook provided writing practice for students in the form of a response essay. These writing prompts focus on real-life experiences that relate to the literature. For the initial essay, students read two selections from the same genre: “The Crain Maiden” (Martin, 2008), and the Puerto Rican legend, “Aunty Misery” (Cofer, 2008). After reading the two selections, students wrote to explain about a situation where they had to let go of something against their wishes and why it was difficult to let go of it (Allen et al., 2008, p. 147). A second essay responded to the reading “The Biography of Helen Keller” (2008). Students were required to think of a person who has had a positive effect on their life and to explain who the person is, how they know the person, and how the person had affected their lives (Allen et al., 2008, p. 165). A third essay required the participants to connect with a novel they read for the course, *Stargirl* (Spinelli, 2000).

Data Analysis

I took extensive notes during the focus group sessions. These were typed and coded. I used the horizontalization method to analyze the participants’ essays. This method begins with highlighting important phrases and then developing meaning from them (Creswell, 2013). The essays assisted in attaining a deeper understanding of the participants’ experiences with writing composition. Additionally, I employed the phenomenological reduction method to my notes from the focus groups, journal, and the students’ writing samples. Phenomenological reduction involves continuous immersion in the experience to create meaning (Merriam, 2002b). Through this process, categories began to reveal themselves.

Findings

The focus group discussions and participants’ writing samples offered meaningful insight into my investigation. Influential factors to the boys’ writing engagement added additional themes to the data. The boys preferred writing in the narrative to expository essays. They felt as though narrative writing gave them the freedom to express themselves without binding them to a set structure.

During the focus groups, the boys often gave answers and then sought confirmation through body language, head nodding or high-fiving. Often times the boys would talk over one another and needed redirection. Regardless of how they saw themselves as writers, they felt that transitioning to expository writing did not occur without effort. When they were required to switch over to expository writing, the boys’ main concern was complying with the format of a formulaic four-paragraph essay. With a show of hands, all of the boys agreed that expository was their preferred method of writing. This was evidenced by their writing samples wherein the boys maintained writing narratives, even including dialogue, when expected to respond expository prompts.

Defining Expository Writing

The participants provided definitions of expository writing in term of content and format.

Content. Jean opened the discussion regarding what types of details are requisite for an expository essay: “You know, it’s expository [to] want to explain or tell you about something.” It was also mentioned that when they were reading a passage, expository writing could be

informational. This prompted discussion comparing fictive and non-fictive texts where all students agreed (raising their hands) that informational text is usually non-fiction. Keenan explained, “It is not when you are telling a story, like one day I was walking through the woods and saw a snake. You have to explain maybe what type of snake it is.”

Format. The students also explained an expository essay adheres to a specific format that is comprised of an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion. The boys discussed and agreed that the definition of expository writing is an “introduction, two main paragraphs, a restatement of the introduction and conclusion.” There was only one student who mentioned a connection between narrative and expository writing. Scrappy stated that in a good expository essay, “it’s like a hamburger using narrative as the meat between the bread.”

Though the students were able to verbalize their understanding of the components of an expository essay, this knowledge was not reflected in all the students’ writing samples. In response to the first writing prompt concerning letting something go that they did not want to, several students wrote about the loss of a pet. Aaron, Eduardo, Eric, Glen, Marc, Natan, Parker, Patrick, Robert, and Sam did not use the format for expository essays and wrote only in narrative. Additionally, left out all punctuation and skipped words. For example, Alex wrote,

While my training begins I had to learn to clear my mind so I thought I’ll go in the pool and go under water and feel the water rushing and pushing against my face. [Since it] felt nice at that moment I cleared my mind [and] the next step was to focus...

Glen’s writing sample was an example of holding onto narrative and not conforming to the four paragraph expository essay. “I thought long and hard about it [u]ntil I said to myself I’m going to give it to the baby. The next day I went to the house and knocked on the door with the teddy bear in my hands.” This writing sample contained a one sentence introduction, two sentences for a body paragraph, and a four sentence conclusion. Jack’s essay concluded with only a single line: “These two stories are true.”

Participants’ Writing Identity

The participants shared their journeys in finding who they were as writers through the focus group discussions and the writing essays.

Grades and scores. Two of the participants, Robert and Jason, excitedly announced that they had received the highest score on their 3rd grade standardized writing exam. Jean divulged that he usually received A’s on his essays in elementary school, but he had been receiving C’s on his expository essays. Ben and Parker suggested the focus group rate themselves as writers on a scale of 1-10. They each felt that they were somewhere between a 6 and an 8.

Conventions. Marshall expressed, “My ideas are great, but my spelling is not that great.” Eric consistently misspelled the word *since*: “Sence my father... Sense we paid...not even a year sence my grandpa had passed...” Generally, the boys wrote more akin to how they spoke than using standard formal English in their essays: “When my dad told [me] that I was moving to a different house. I was like ‘WHAT’ because I will miss all my friends” (Jean). “I know it sounds stupid to jump from a table to a branch but whatever,” asserted Karl. “I was gonna lose when my sword broke,” wrote Patrick. In Nathan’s paper, he wrote, “My Xbox was super fun to play with.” In Marc’s essay, he included, “So Kevin found this cat and it was really fluffy and round so he named it poof balls...” The writing samples exposed numerous errors in basic conventions such as capitalization, appropriate punctuation, and spelling.

Sociological contexts. When asked if he felt that writing is a feminine art, the participants answered, no. Scrappy pointed out there are “a lot of guy authors.” He followed up

his statement with, “Girls don’t come up with the ideas guys do. Guys think of everything. They think of guys stuff like adventure.”

Writing Style Preference

All of the boys agreed with a show of hands that narrative writing was easier and that they enjoyed writing in the narrative far more than in the expository. Keenan yelled out, “Hands down narrative!!” After this comment, I asked the participants if they agreed with the statement and they expressed themselves through head nods, raising their hands, and high-fives. Scrappy added, “Narrative writing is imaginative.” Regardless of how they saw themselves as writers, transitioning to expository writing did not occur effortlessly as the boys’ main concern was complying with a format. Many of the boys referred to this format as a formula.

Other participants offered alternative perspectives as to what writing format they preferred. Keenan stated, “Narrative writing is my style.” Robert, Aaron, and Eric qualified Keenan’s statement shouting out (trying to give their response before other participants) that with the narrative essay, they were “able to express our feelings freely,” according to Robert, and “without being confined to a set of specific rules,” explained Aaron. Eric referred to the format as “a formula.”

Imagination. Jace expressed that in narrative writing, “you can use your imagination.” Keenan added, “Not everything in narrative writing has to be real.” In the writing sample, Aaron including elements of creative writing including, “One night Me...and my friends... were [at a] party all night. We went to the casino and had a blast. In all me and my friends made 10,000 in poker.” Frank and Aaron incorporated luxury cars into their essays. “Once this boy woke in a lamborghini he found out it wasn’t his and had to give it away” (Frank). “The Bug[a]tti that I had to let go was amaseing...It was so fast and comfordle, and good looking” (Aaron).

Storytelling. During a focus group discussion, Dean stated, “Narrative is easier you can say what you want and make your own story.” The writing samples included examples of narrative story telling within them. Aaron wrote about a time when friends convinced him to jump from a branch to a table at the park, “Then, one day I got annoyed and tr[i]ed it again and I did it and it felt great to say I did it.” Sam attempted to begin an essay with a cliché, “It was a bright and sunny evening. I was in my room playing Call of Duty: Ghosts, [w]hen a crash came from my closet. ‘Who is there.’ ‘Woof woof.’ Natan told of how he took up playing soccer, “This accomplishment made my family proud. ‘Finally made the old man happy,’ I said. Now I play soccer with my friends.” In Parker’s essay about winning a baseball game he included, “[B]ut I think it’s had because you will have a lot on your mind like, ‘I’m their only hope.” When complaining about homework, Robert added, “One day, I was doing my homework and I didn’t understand the problem. After my mom helped me understood the problem.”

Descriptive language. There were only three participants who employed use of any description in their essays. Parker wrote, “On a Saturday at 3:16 p.m. once I saw this beautiful german shepard with brown eyes, brown hair (Fur) with white pockadots & flappy ears & I thought to myself what a great dog.” Sam described an experience he had with his dog: “I stood up and went to my closet. It was dark and dusty. I think I found what he was looking forEWw he was looking for that dusty soggy ball that I got him for Christmas.” Eduardo expressed his love and knowledge of boat mechanics, “My dad had just bought a 30 ft Avenger with 2 Mercury 275 hp...For the first engine we didn’t know where the bolt was to unscrew the engine.”

Personal Connection to the Writing Prompt

Robert, Aaron, Eric and Scrappy stated that they liked writing biographies. “I like biography writing. A biography is about someone” (Scrappy). Moe began a discussion connecting the biography project from the beginning of the year to the present conversation. The students’ writing echoed the opinions expressed in the focus group discussions.

Loss. The narrative writing included stories about situations that were obviously deeply meaningful to the boys. Moe, Paker, and Sam wrote about the loss of a pet. “As soon as I found out, I cried all day. [The dog] was like my little Brother and I will never forget my first pet” (Moe). “Til[I] this day I cannot stop thinking about my best friend... Rest in peace” (Sam). Eric and Armando cathartically told of a passing of a grandparent. “Once he died I was very sad because he [my grandfather] was like a father to me. S[i]nce my father left me when I was 3” (Eric). “I still love him and I want him to be here now. He is in my heart and always will be” (Armando). In one essay, Natan told about selling a materialistic item to help his family: “It was my Xbox 360, [and] I had to sell it so I can help pay some of my grandma’s hospital bill.” In response to the same prompt, Jean wrote of the loss of his family unit as a result of the dissolution of his parents’ marriage due to his mother’s drug addiction: “I was told that my mother was in the hospital and might die. That she had taken a bunch of pills.”

Positive influences. In an essay about influential people in their lives, Robert, Ben, Eric, and Jace wrote about their mothers. Robert was thankful that his mom was able to assist him with his homework, “I’m in an advanced math class so I get a lot of homework for that class. Whenever I don’t understand a problem, my mom helps me.” Ben expressed his gratitude for becoming the kind of person he aspires to be, kind, well-rounded, and self-sufficient. Eric explained, “She looks for the bright side in things.” Jace did not write about how his mom influenced him, but instead about how much he enjoys her cooking, “I love her bar-b-cue chicken.” Eduardo chose his dad and wrote about much time they spend together fixing boats. John expressed, “My brother is the best and without him I wouldn’t be me... My mom is a hard worker [and never home]. Also my dad is...not in Florida. So my brother is the person I see the most. During focus group discussion, Scrappy told the group that he chose to write about his brother because, “He’s always telling me to do stuff and go for it. He never doubts me.” Sam and Curtis respectively decided their collective family is the most positive influence in their lives.

Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to glean an understanding of middle-school boys’ experiences as emerging writers. The participants capably defined expository writing as a form of writing that entails explanation, description, or information. The articulations of their definitions of expository writing served as robust markers of the participants’ cognitive, social, and linguistic advancement. This elucidation of the metamorphosis children undergo as they advance from elementary to middle school aligns with previous research. At the end of elementary school, children are able to learn from explicit instruction in syntax and discourse (Ravid & Tolchinsky, 2004; Zins & Hooper, 2012).

In opposition to the stance that boys do not view themselves as decent writers (Nippold et al., 2005), the participants believed in their writing capabilities. The participants included that it was Young Adult Literature (YAL) authors that motivated them to write. Their views on a literary culture dominated by men enabled them to identify writing with masculinity thus cultivating positive feelings towards the art of writing. Villalón, Mateos, and Cuevas (2015)

assert that students' perceptions of writing significantly impacts the quality of writing that students produce.

Given a choice between narrative and expository writing, 6th grade boys prefer narrative writing. They feel as though they are able to write about themselves in an unobstructed manner. Daly (2002) expresses that boys feel restricted by structured writing styles. In opposition to previous considerations (Harrison, 2010; Newkirk, 2000), the participants did not shy away from expressive, emotional writing that might be considered feminine. In deep contrast, the boys' writing included sadness over the loss of a loved one and the extraordinary bonds they hold with close family members.

Implications

Particularly acute is the need for ELA educators to possess and to practice the most current knowledge in the field in order to meet the needs of all students. This study denotes an integral weakness in current trends in writing instruction for adolescent boys. When teachers are mainly concerned with complying with prescribed prompts for standardized tests, they stifle boys' natural story telling abilities (Dyson & Freedman, 1991). It is possible that differentiated practices with writing instruction could enhance boys' writing proficiency and thereby academic success. Further research needs to focus on the blending of narrative in expository text as a gateway to more sophisticated writing techniques.

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