

Note-taking: one step at a time

Year 5/6

STELLA®

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'It's your turn to correct the projects.'
My teaching partner said these words with a wry grin.

I work in a multi-age classroom. I have a teaching partner with whom I share the care and responsibility for 61 active and lively Year 5/6 students. Our Integration Aide provides support for 5 designated children within our classroom.

Back to those famous words.

I viewed the 61 pieces of work with trepidation. We all knew what was coming. The work would display copious amounts of writing, colourful illustrations and creative headings. Unfortunately, we all knew many of the students would follow that age-old adage: 'Never mind the quality feel the width.'

The ensuing discussion revealed nothing we didn't already know. As teachers we have all been faced with slabs of directly copied text which children are neither able to read nor understand. How can true learning arise from this type of research and presentation? We had clarified the problem, now we needed to devise a solution.

Working within a Middle Years framework, the children developed contract activities related to the overall theme of Animals. Part of these contracts involved the research and presentation of information on an animal of their choice. This provided the team with a perfect opportunity to develop and refine note-taking skills that were obviously lacking in the children's literacy repertoire.

It was envisioned that the lesson would be presented as an open-ended task where each child would be able to display their understandings and the final product would be a culmination of their skills and abilities. As for many children this was to be an early experience in this area of literacy, a secure framework and supportive environment were paramount. The children needed to feel they could take risks without fear and that support was readily at hand.

The Sequence

Why rewrite what someone else has already done?

Children want purpose for their learning. They need to see the value behind completed tasks. To ensure this the children were advised that not only would their work be published and displayed they would also be asked to present their work to their peers, therefore they needed to be able to display expert knowledge relating to their animal. Now they had purpose.

Blow their minds.

Engagement. We had heard the term so often, but how were we to achieve it? The answer: visual text. It is familiar to children, it is user friendly and it offers visual support as well as auditory information. Most of all it is 'fun'.

The process.

As this was to be a learning process for all involved, including the teachers, flexibility and revision was required at each step of the way. A brief explanation of what was to take place was provided to the children. They collected tools and equipment for note-taking, found a position from which they could clearly view the screen and we began.

A short section of the video was played and the video was stopped. During this break the children were involved in discussion of what they had viewed and what the most important facts were. The teacher then modelled for the children ways in which this information could be recorded in brief point form. (This became a starting point for a 'Useful Strategies Chart'.)

This 'stop, start, chat' procedure allowed for interactive viewing by the children, with the emphasis placed on interactive learning not passive viewing. The video continued in this manner with the children voicing their opinions on the facts they saw as important. These ideas were written onto a chart. This chart provided children with a forum in which to see their ideas as valued and was later used as a scaffold for those children who felt they needed more support.

Shorthand

A secondary feature of note-taking arose during this procedure, which was the speed required for recording information. The children were quick to discover that writing every word they heard was difficult and often information was missed. The response from their peers was 'Do this then'.

These children had already begun to develop their own shorthand. This was the ideal opportunity to share their knowledge. The children offered to demonstrate their own abbreviations and invented shorthand. During the discussion that followed it was decided to make these shorthand cues a part of our Useful Strategies Chart. In this way everyone would have access to a reference point should they need it. And so we continued.

Now what

Note-taking complete. What to do next? The children were excited about what they had accomplished, but they had also noticed that their notes were different to those the teachers had been recording during the same process. Note-taking is a personal thing. We rely on our own experience and knowledge to record and process information.

My partner and I decided it was time for some collaboration. We shared anecdotes about our time at university and strategies we had employed for ensuring all information was included in our notes. We both agreed bringing a cappuccino machine into the room probably wasn't viable, but a similar discussion time could be established to allow children to compare, clarify and reorder thoughts and information.

This time allowed children to share their notes and enabled them to develop a more comprehensive reading of the video. At this stage the process of rewriting was introduced.

Rewriting.

The children discussed options for rewriting and together we decided to include the use of subheadings to maintain clarity for the reader. Possible subheadings were listed on the Strategies Chart.

The children then proceeded to use their notes and the subheadings as the basis for a piece of text. The collaborative notes and Useful Strategies Charts were easily accessible to the children to enable easy access to a supportive framework. They moved through the various stages involved in the publication process, those of the initial draft, rereading for content, punctuation and spelling and the completion of a final public document.

The children were also able to choose from various written presentations, including books, posters, powerpoint presentations, mobiles or dioramas. They were then afforded an opportunity to present their completed publications to their peers.

The resulting pride displayed by the children evidenced the beneficial aspects of this procedure. By taking ownership of the procedure the children were able to display their ideas, knowledge and creativity. By empowering the children with the skills to collect and decipher information we facilitated the development of their ability to accomplish at higher levels.

Reflection

This session gave us a base for what was to become an ongoing procedure. As the year progressed we revisited our note-taking techniques frequently. The procedure was constantly modified and refined as the children increase their knowledge and skill in this area.

Our list of Useful Strategies and Shorthand remained under construction as children discovered new refining techniques. The ownership of these sheets was taken by the children allowing them to discuss within their peer group modifications they wished to make. This ownership has had the added benefit of encouraging children to clarify and justify their own points of view.

A challenge? Definitely. But the rewards were such that it was well worth the journey.