

## **Four-Blocks Journals for Professionals**

The new school year is a great time to consider new challenges and opportunities! I'm hoping that if you haven't tried keeping a journal that you might consider doing so this school year. Specifically, how about keeping a journal of this year's implementation of Four-Blocks? We've long required that students keep journals of various sorts, but rarely do we, as professionals, keep one. Besides writing to increase our confidence and practice our writing skills, there are many worthwhile reasons that you might consider keeping a journal this year. Let's consider the "who, what, why, and how" of professional journal-keeping...

So often teachers and administrators form study groups during the school year that require reading a book and getting together periodically for discussions. Of course, I certainly wouldn't want to discourage doing that. However, so few teachers and administrators include writing in their professional growth plans. Yet, my experience across the country has been that most teachers don't feel confident in the area of writing. We preach it in the classroom, but we don't really practice what we preach the way that we should. Either in lieu of meeting weekly or in addition to gathering weekly or monthly, why not have written conversations that stimulate and share our thoughts? There are several good ways to get the ball rolling with this dialogue. One such example would be for a topic to be announced after which everyone could write a response/comment/idea related to that topic. Even without having a meeting, journals could be passed among professionals who would respond to that particular journal and then continue to pass the journals to responders. A set number of people to respond to the original entry and a reasonable time limit could be established (pass the journals to five people within a two week period?) before the journal would be returned to its owner. The owners then could enjoy the written dialogue elicited by their initial entries. Brave groups might occasionally meet to discuss how the written conversations are evolving and how the written conversations differ from oral ones.

If you're a new teacher implementing Four-Blocks for the very first time, a journal can offer an avenue for clarifying your thinking about the whys and hows of implementation.

Just as we tell students when we require that they keep math, science, and social studies journals, putting thoughts and processes into succinct words helps us to make sense of what we're doing. Jot down the successes you're experiencing so that you'll have documentation. (There might be days when you'll want to read back over those to console yourself!) Also jot down the problem areas in hopes that it will help you to better define the rough spots and find solutions.

If you're a continuing Four-Blocks teacher, writing daily or weekly in a journal could serve to help you refine your implementation. Your reflections about the impact of your instruction and organization will surely prove to be helpful both to yourself and to others if you're willing to share. Use the journal to set goals for continual improvement. What have you not tried yet that you want to experiment with—Book Club groups, 3-Ring Circus, ERT, Readers' Theater, a new activity in the Words Block, a writing mini-lesson in which you try to mimic the style of one of your favorite writers, or a new method of sharing in the Self-Selected Reading Block? Surely there's something you just haven't been brave enough to try or that you haven't taken the time to understand well enough. Give yourself a pep talk in your journal, take the plunge and try it, and then write about it to explore how successful you've been.

If you're an administrator, there are a couple of ideas for you to consider: 1) Keeping a journal of your support and observations about how you feel implementation is progressing in your school; and 2) Reading the journals of your teachers (with permission, of course) if this is a practice you've encouraged. The first idea would help administrators reflect on their own active support during implementation. The latter idea would be a way to monitor which teachers need more active support. It could serve as a way to open doors for dialogue between the administrator and the teachers. With new teachers, you might try the classroom model of reading their journals and writing responses to them as additional support. With all that new teachers are confronted with, having you draw a smiley face and write a positive comment on a journal entry might offer just the encouragement they need. Be sure to remember that this kind of writing isn't about correctness. Resist the urge to correct grammar and punctuation! This is all

about professional dialogues and about building confidence among professionals in their written communication.

If you're supporting Four-Blocks in some way as a coach, consultant, or curriculum specialist, keeping a journal of your own can serve so many worthwhile purposes. It can be a great way to record good ideas you've gotten in classrooms you've visited so that you can try out those ideas or share them with others. (I know that there have been numerous neat ideas that I've told myself I needed to remember only to forget them quickly after leaving a class I've visited. I do miss my mind!) Also, as you demonstrate or observe lessons, you might make note of why you feel some lessons worked well and why others didn't. Those reflections are so important as we all refine our instruction. You might also be the person who generates the response journal by writing things you've pondered during visits, leaving the journal with the teacher you visited, and asking if that teacher would read and respond to your query. A couple of sample entries could be:

“You have really streamlined your Writing Block! How did you get kids in the routine and how long did it take to run this smoothly?” (This comment gives the teacher a “pat on the back” and gets him/her to share good information that might be shared with other teachers.)

“How long have your students been trying Book Club groups? Are you enjoying this format during Guided Reading?” (Maybe this format was going well and you're just initiating conversation to explore it a bit, or maybe it didn't go well and you're opening the door for discussion about it.)

Just as with all reading that we do, we must learn to read between the lines as we study the responses in these journals. Share more when there's a sincere request for that; make a brief courteous remark in writing if it seems that the responder isn't opening a door for discussion; and remember to invite two-way discussions. Don't monopolize!

For many years, assigning writing was what many—if not most—teachers did. In recent years, we have advanced into teaching writing through modeling our mini-lessons daily. That's a huge leap! However, many—again, if not most—teachers still lack confidence

in their own ability as writers. Maybe if we write for our own purposes, rather than solely for our students, then we'll develop more fully and truly as writers.

What a great model we could provide for our students if we show them how professionals can enjoy written communication. If you write in a journal for your own satisfaction or if you share with others on your staff, don't forget to mention it to your students. They need to see us practice what we preach to them! Perhaps the greatest benefit, however, is your own personal and professional growth as a writer through developing a habit of communicating that way.

Happy writing! -----Cheryl