

## Will “Writing Buddies” improve attitude and writing performance?



Nancy Howard  
Grade 2/3 Teacher Lansdowne Costain School, Grand Erie District School Board

Heather Noddin  
Grade 5/6 Teacher, Lansdowne Costain School, Grand Erie District School Board

This is our third Action Research Project together. Our first project focused on letter writing, our second on math journal writing and our emphasis this year was on the writing process.



### Abstract

Nancy and Heather wanted to select writing activities that would be fun and were interested in developing peer mentoring as a teaching/learning tool to develop skills in the Grade 2/3 and Grade 5/6 classroom. Their goal was to support students to promote a positive attitude toward the writing process and nurture confidence and skill when students were engaged in writing activities. They researched the question, “Will ‘Writing Buddies’ improve attitude and writing performance?”

### Classroom Background

The Grade 2/3 class consisted of 21 students – seven Grade 2 students and fourteen Grade 3 students. The majority of students in Grade 2 were working at a higher language level compared to the majority of Grade 3 students, working at or below grade level. One Grade 3 student was on an informal Individual Education Plan (IEP) working at the Grade 2 level and needed individual assistance for scribing.

The Grade 5/6 class consisted of 25 students – seventeen Grade 5 and eight Grade 6 students. One Grade 5 student was working on an informal IEP in Language and seven Grade 8 students were working on formal or informal IEP’s in language.

The dynamics of our school population is constantly changing. We have a high number of single parent, lower socioeconomic families and at the other extreme we have some very high income, two parent families.

### What was our concern?

Our school Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) test scores in writing indicated that our students have consistently fallen below provincial standards. Student survey questionnaires showed many students do not consider themselves good writers and indicated a lack of interest in written communication.

We needed to promote a positive attitude toward the writing process and develop confidence and skill when engaged in writing activities. Our goal was to select writing activities that would be fun and develop peer mentoring as a teaching/learning tool to develop skills.

## What was our question?

Will 'Writing Buddies' improve attitude and writing performance?

## Focus areas...

Throughout the year we were hoping to see an improvement in overall writing skills. We endeavored to develop writing process skills teaching the following steps:

- brainstorming of ideas;
- completing a planner;
- writing a first draft;
- sharing with a partner;
- revising and editing – alone and with a peer;
- developing conventions - spelling, grammar, punctuation;
- organizing ideas into complete sentences and paragraphs while remaining on topic;
- completing a final draft;
- publishing work.

## What were our writing improvement strategies?

In September, we developed a Writing Buddy program. Using experience gained from last year's Action Research partnering, we realized that task-committed students needed to be paired with students who experienced difficulty putting their thoughts on paper and staying focused. We needed to be mindful of certain personalities who would work well together as partners. We made our choices and began our writing buddy program.

After completing the first writing buddy activity, we became aware of several areas of concern and decided that some changes in partnering were necessary. We also agreed that we needed a change in the format so that each student was responsible for submitting his/her own personal written assignment instead of collaborating verbally with their senior partner and having the older student submit the written copy.

In assessing our classes, we determined that our students were very similar, having many academic and behavioural difficulties. This became a challenge to our programming. Many of our students did not enjoy putting their thoughts and ideas on paper, so our task was to find creative methods of engaging our weaker writers.

We decided that we needed to invest in some new materials to spark interest and enjoyment. We submitted a proposal to our Superintendent, Greg Anderson, outlining our action plan:

- develop oral and written communication skills in Language by using Drama and Technology;
- improve listening skills and comprehension by using a Novel Study Unit;
- improve written skills by the use of Think Pads to develop vocabulary and spelling skills;
- develop creative thinking skills by engaging in partner and group activities;
- improve peer mentoring and self assessment skills by working together assessing their performance after each activity;
- improve reading skills through shared writing activities – plays, stories, brochures, menus, and commercials.

When our proposal was approved we purchased materials for Language Word Walls, posters, high interest reading and writing materials and professional materials related to the content of the project.

We programmed planning sessions to discuss lesson plans, teaching strategies, work assessment and writing activity results. We informed parents of ongoing language goals in monthly newsletters. We developed rubrics for self and peer evaluation. We used All Star Language strategies and modeled writing in our writing buddy sessions.

On November 28, 2003 we attended the Ontario Educational Research Council Conference. Here, we shared with peers our progress and concerns to date and received ideas and encouragement.

In May, we developed a Student Attitude Questionnaire and distributed it to each student to acquire feedback on the success of the writing buddy program. We also developed a Teacher/Volunteer Survey to gain information from other adults who assisted us with our program throughout the year.

**Student Action Research Attitude Questionnaire**

**Writing Buddies.....**

Do you like to work with a buddy to complete writing activities?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes          \_\_\_\_\_ No

Do you think you and your writing buddy worked well together:

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes          \_\_\_\_\_ No

Because \_\_\_\_\_

Did you like your writing buddy?      \_\_\_\_\_Yes          \_\_\_\_\_ No

Do you think you and your buddy shared the work equally?

\_\_\_\_\_Yes          \_\_\_\_\_ No

Explain \_\_\_\_\_

Would you like to do Writing Buddies again another year?

\_\_\_\_\_Yes          \_\_\_\_\_ No

Explain \_\_\_\_\_

Did you enjoy the different types of writing activities?      \_\_\_\_\_Yes      \_\_\_\_\_ No

Did you enjoy adding pictures to your story writing?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes          \_\_\_\_\_ No

Which one do you like doing the best?

\_\_\_\_\_ Pictures          \_\_\_\_\_ Numbers      \_\_\_\_\_ Words

Which one do you find the hardest?

Pictures       Numbers       Words

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you think you are better now at explaining your math thinking?

Yes       No

What was your favourite math journaling activity out of the following list?

Telephone Talk       Clues (What Number am I?)

Tangrams       Quilt

Geometric Pictures (T/F)       Catalogue Shopping

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

### Teacher/Student Teacher/Volunteer Questionnaire

Did you observe student excitement and interest in the writing topics presented?

\_\_\_\_\_

In your opinion, has the Buddy Program improved the students' attitudes and self esteem toward the writing process?

\_\_\_\_\_

Do the students have a positive outlook towards coming to Buddy sessions?

Do you believe that a positive attitude toward writing contributes to academic achievement?

### Indicators of Success

An individual rubric was created for each Writing Buddy session. As well, each student was responsible for completing their own self-assessment rubric indicating how they felt the session progressed.

The results at the end of the year indicated the following results:



Grade 2/3 50% improved their writing marks from term 1 to term 3  
 32% remained the same  
 18% of the marks went down

Grade 5/6 52% improved their writing marks from term 1 to term 3  
 20% remained the same  
 28% of the marks went down

In assessing our final results, based on two classes with academic and behavioural difficulties, we were happy to see that 50 % of the Grade 2/3's and 52% of the Grade 5/6's improved in their writing abilities.

Through our attitude survey we discovered that 83 % of our students indicated that they enjoyed writing. The Grade 2/3 class found the most difficult aspects of the writing process were the rough draft and editing and revising. The Grade 5/6 class found creating a story planner and editing and revising were the hardest parts. When asked if they liked working with their buddies 89% of the Grade 2/3 class and 66% of the Grade 5/6 class indicated that they enjoyed working with their buddy. 89% of the Grade 2/3 class and 63% of the Grade 5/6 class felt that the buddies worked well together. 72 % of the Grade 2/3's and 58% of the Grade 5/6's signified that they would like to do the Buddy program again next year.

One of the goals of our Action Research was to improve students' attitudes toward the writing process. When asked if they had fun, 89% of the Grade 2/3's and 92% of the Grade 5/6's answered that they enjoyed the program and the writing activities.

The second goal of our Action Research was to improve the writing performance of the students. When asked if they felt they were better writers in June, 89% of the Grade 2/3's and 96% of the Grade 5/6's felt that they were better writers.

It was interesting that both of our classes enjoyed the same activities when asked to choose their favourite topics. The most chosen topics were:

- Dragon Story
- Halloween Activity
- Pizza
- Letter/Postcards
- Mouse and Motorcycle Activities

Some anecdotal comments made by our students about the activities were:

### Grade 2/3

"I liked my buddy. I think we stayed on task and shared our thoughts."

"We got better and better. We were close friends and finished our work on time."

"We had great ideas and put our ideas into the stories."

"My buddy was nice to me. We always took turns."

## Grade 5/6

“I like writing because I can tell people things without telling them with my voice.”

“I can write down what’s in my imagination. Our activities were all very exciting.”

“It is fun writing about interesting topics.”

“Assessing yourself is too hard because you want to give yourself a high mark, but I don’t know if it’s appropriate.”

## Another Perspective

As part of our assessment we asked other adults involved in our research for their comments on the writing buddy program. Overall, their comments were very positive.

“The Grade 5/6 students looked forward to writing buddies. They felt good about themselves after they helped the Grade 2/3’s” (Evelyn Picketts – long term supply teacher).

“The Grade 2/3 students were very enthusiastic, composing their puppet plays based on the novel The Mouse And The Motorcycle. With this open-ended assignment the students had the opportunity to express their ideas creating a new version of the story” (Katie Fink – Student Teacher).

“This program has improved the student’s attitude and self-esteem. They appeared to work better with another student. They seemed to enjoy writing about ‘hands on’ activities (e.g. pizza making). A good effort was put forth” (Jackie Dawdy – Volunteer).

The students showed a lot of enthusiasm in their presentation of their travel brochures. They all seemed to enjoy making their cars and the commercials. They put a lot of thought into their projects” (Jackie Dawdy – Volunteer).

## Culminating Tasks

In May, we started a Novel Study based on the novel The Mouse and the Motorcycle. This challenged our students to use different types of writing techniques. Students were taught how to use ‘Persuasive Writing’. They had two writing tasks, one to persuade the hotel manager not to destroy the mice and the second task was to persuade Ralph that their vehicle was one that he should buy. They created menus for the Mountain View Inn, which was the setting of the novel. They used the menus in Math class to add and subtract money when they ordered their breakfast. They developed plays for a puppet show based on Ralph, the main character of our story. Then we did a cross-curricular activity using language and social study concepts to create a travel brochure, to entice visitors to the Mountain View Inn. This entailed map making, developing descriptive details about the Inn, such as food, activities and prices. They highlighted animal and plant life native to this area. For the science/technology component of the project, students were expected to design and build a new vehicle for Ralph that was fast and had at least one moving part. Students were expected to explain the source of power for their vehicle. They used an inclined platform to race and measure the distance that their vehicle traveled. We had a guest speaker, one of our students’

parents, to talk to our students about being a good car salesperson and running a successful car lot. He taught the students techniques used to persuade people to buy their cars. Students used these ideas and worked in a small group of four to develop a television commercial advertising their vehicles. The commercials were aired in front of both classes with some of the commercials being videotaped. Parents, grandparents and other classes were invited to attend Uncle Lester's Super Awesome Car Show where students proudly displayed their vehicles and all novel study project work.

Students were presented with a 'Well Done' Certificate and surprised to learn that Ralph decided to buy all the vehicles.

### Student comments about the culminating task:

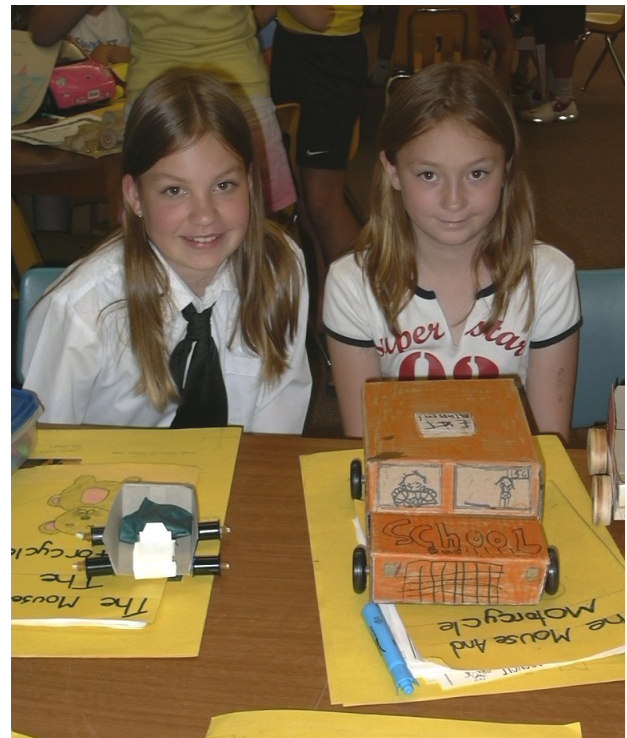
"It was fun working on Uncle Lester's Car Show."

"I liked it when we did our commercials."

"I had fun and The Mouse And The Motorcycle work was cool."



*David and Bryan proudly display their Mouse*



*Laura and Shayna share their awesome projects with their peers.*





*Lindsay and Crystine receive 'Well Done' certificates for their great vehicles.*



*Jenna and Kory's vehicles display hard work and creative thinking.*



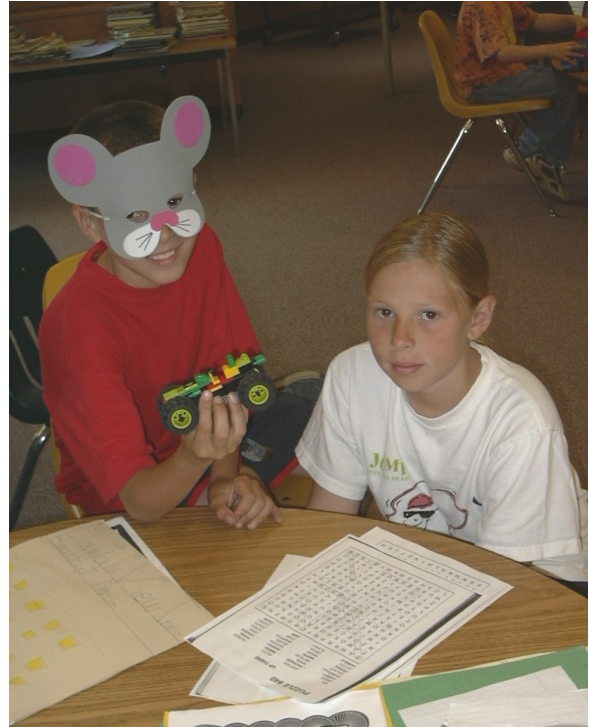
*Tory and Cassie – Best Friends and Writing Buddies*



*Colin and Nicole worked diligently and cooperatively to complete their vehicles and travel*



*Corine and Braelyn have fun participating in Uncle Lester's Super Awesome Car Show.*



*Emily and Will enthusiastically participate in their car commercial advertising their vehicles.*

## Conclusions and Next Steps

We feel that our Writing Buddy program was particularly successful this year, as we had many reluctant writers. Our program allowed students to see that writing activities can be fun. Our survey data indicated that 90% or more felt that they were better writers in June than in September.

The program promoted friendship and peer mentoring which flowed through to recess and lunch breaks. Students enjoyed our end-of-the-year Buddy Picnic concluding our year long activities.

Personally, we have continued to develop as result of working together. We have become better writing planners, organizers, evaluators and have enjoyed our third action research project. Our planning sessions were successful and we explored many different types of assessment strategies.

We developed many practical ways of using our writing resource materials to teach new and innovative strategies to develop the writing process. Each assignment encompassed a range of oral, visual, written and an assortment of 'hands on' activities to engage all learning types.

We plan to continue the buddy program next year to challenge our students to be better writers and to enjoy the many different formats that writing presents. We will administer an Attitude Survey at the beginning and end of the year to gather information to help us develop an appropriate program, focusing on our students' needs and at the end of the year to determine if we've met some of these needs. We hope to use the results of this survey to 'fine tune' our working student partnerships. Parents will be invited regularly to take part in our Writing Buddy activities. As a result of our efforts this year, we are hoping to see some improvement in the fall 2004 EQAO test results.

## References

Materials that we used:

- Write a Story by Evan-Moor
- The Writing Teacher's Toolbox Carol Frank Carson-Dellosa Publishing Company
- Art and Writing Projects by Dena Schutzer
- Write On by Rachel Kranz
- Oodles of Writing by Linda Milliken
- Creative Writing by J.L. Smith M.A.
- The Ultimate Shape Book by Evan-Moor
- The Mouse And The Motorcycle – Beverly Cleary