Lesson Closure: An Important Piece of the Student Learning Puzzle

Kathy Ganske

This teaching tip reminds us of the critical importance of lesson closure for ensuring that what we teach today is useful for students tomorrow and the days after.

Closure Matters

Recent recollection of a childhood ritual drew my thoughts to literacy and a potential avenue for increasing student learning. During my elementary years, rarely did a school day pass without my dad asking me at some point in the evening, "What did you learn in school today?" It was sort of a standing joke, but not really. Anticipating his question and wanting to be prepared, I kept my eyes and ears open throughout the day for potential candidates for demonstrating understanding—a fact, a process, a project, or something similar—that I might share when I got home.

Years later, at the start of my teaching career, I remembered the ritual with some fondness and began to wonder, "What understandings are my students taking home?" As they waited for their late-afternoon buses to come, I began asking them to recall a new idea, concept, fact, or process they'd learned that day that they could share with someone that night. At first, students were slow to generate responses, but that gradually changed. In anticipation of the talk, they sifted through our day's journey, as evidenced by the occasional announcement of "I'm going to hang on to that one!" that punctuated our classroom learning. The end-of-day wrap-up provided a satisfying sense of closure, and the recap of learning made students aware of what they'd accomplished.

Enacting End-of-the-Week Closure: Student Newsletter Writing

During my last year as a classroom teacher, I further pressed the notion of closure by initiating an end-of-the-week newsletter with my second graders. I encouraged at-home talk about the news and students' accomplishments. Parents and guardians loved the fact that the children had authored the newsletter and eagerly awaited its backpack arrival. It gave them an inside look at their child's school experience (see Figure 1). At the end of the year, the principal asked me for the entire collection of newsletters to pass on to my replacement, so the teacher could gain a sense of the work in which we had engaged.

Writing *The Koko Report* (named by students in honor of our ongoing bake-sale support for Koko the gorilla and the Gorilla Foundation) was in itself a ritual. Each Friday, we gathered on the carpet with chart paper in front of us. I listed key content areas and asked the students if they had other topics to add, such as field trips, visitors, special projects, or birthdays. We then reflected on the week's learning and events and co-constructed a web of details (see Figure 2). Next, students signed up as reporters to write one of the articles, usually working in groups of two or three but occasionally solo. The talk and recording of information jump-started and deepened students' recollections of our week, and the web provided support for their beginning writing skills, as did the discussion and feedback that took place in the small groups. Over time, their reflecting and our webbing became more detailed, and the collaboration and talk fostered their greater independence.

Once each group had drafted its piece, members brought the article to me and read it aloud while I typed it on a blank newsletter template. We talked about particular writing strengths and needs and performed a group edit. By the end of the 45–60-minute workshop, I had met with all of the groups and the newsletter was complete, except for a few teacher comments to parents and guardians and photocopying.

Kathy Ganske is a research professor in the Peabody College of Education and Human Development at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, USA; e-mail kathy.ganske@vanderbilt.edu.

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Figure 1
Second-Grade Student-Written Weekly Newsletter, May (Pages 1 and 2)

The Koko Report

The REAL News coming to you each week from Room 9, Second Grade May 2

Weather Strikes Back

This week we read *The Magic School Bus Inside a Hurricane* by Joanna Cole, because we are studying about wind and weather. It is about Ms. Frizzle and her class that are studying weather. Of course you know that whatever they study they always end up at that particular place. Anyway, they went to get on the bus that turned into a weather balloon that rose and rose and rose until they rose so high they turned into an airplane. They were getting closer to a hurricane. They wanted to see how it works. Soon they were inside it! Joanna Cole's books are more exciting than other books.

by Steve

Clouds, Tornadoes, and Hurricanes

We are studying weather. We learned three kinds of clouds. They are: cumulus, stratus, and cirrus. One kind of cirrus cloud is a mare's tail. It looks like a horse's tail when it's running. You see mare's tail on nice days. We looked at cloud pictures. We also saw the first tornado picture taken over a century ago. That means over 100 years ago! In the picture is a BIG cloud and big tornado in the middle. There are two more tornadoes beginning to grow on each side. (Ms. Ganske saw three tornadoes when she was a kid.)

We read about tornadoes. Once a tornado picked up a whole crate of eggs and took them off very far. It set them down carefully and none of them were broken.

Hurricanes make very big waves which damage homes. That's why beach homes are ruined. Hurricanes are 300-600 miles wide! Hurricanes' wind speed goes up to 200-300 mph.

by Amanda, Dustin, Kristin, and Lizzie

May Baskets

On Thursday it was May Day. We made May baskets for a special person. We saved our milk cartons and washed them out. We got some paper and wrapped the paper around the milk carton and then put a handle on it. Then when we got home we put a little present in the May basket and put the basket on a person's deck for a surprise. It was fun because we got to give it to somebody without them knowing and we had made it.

by Scott and Sean

(*continued*)

In schools with large English learner populations, the process just described might also include translation of the newsletter. Different language needs might be addressed by including less text and more illustrations with captions. The latter approach could also support students with special needs. Furthermore, news stories could be dictated or recorded and made into a digital newsletter, or they might be shared with parents via a video news show that includes some feature stories in multiple languages. Regardless of the mode, student talk and collaboration are important elements for ensuring everyone's active involvement in its creation.

Evaluation of the newsletter writing was largely formative. I captured highlights of students' performance on sticky notes and in journal entries.

Figure 1
Second-Grade Student-Written Weekly Newsletter, May (Pages 1 and 2) (*continued*)

The Tales

We are done with our Publishing House stories. Ms. Ganske gave us an assignment to do tall tales after we read "Grandpa's Farm." In that story there was a cow, and a mighty wind came up and blew the cow like a big cow kite. The wind blew a barn, and it landed on the cow's tail and cut it off. Grandma had this salve that made things grow. She put some on the cow and it grew a new tail. She put some salve on the old tail and it grew a new cow! In a tall tale the story is exaggerated. We are writing about all the thunderstorms and seasons, like "The Hurricane of '29" or "The Fall of '82" or "The Thunderstorm of '68 or "The Tornado of '97."

by Jesse, Patrick, and Stephen

TV Turn-Off Day

Seventeen boys and girls participated in this event. TV Turn-Off is where you don't watch TV. You do other stuff, like ride your bike or run. If our school gets up to 11,000 hours of no TV, we get to have a popsicle party on the track with the teachers having a balloon toss.

by Brian and Matt

Weighing Pounds

We have been studying weight: pounds and kilograms. We have put a kilogram on a balance scale and then tried to make it balance. We put 23 scissors on and it still didn't balance! The next day we put a quart of water on it and it balanced! We learned that the kilogram is made of 1000 grams.

by Jessica, Lauren, and Pat

The Story of the Castle in the Attic

The Castle in the Attic is about a boy named William. William shrank his nurse. Then he felt bad and shrank himself. Then he and the Silver Knight go on a journey to find the other half of the coin so William and his nurse can be big again. There is a wizard named Alastor. He has the part of the coin that makes you big.

Now William is in a dark forest with the Silver Knight. We think they will find the coin and make themselves big again, and Mrs. Phillips, the nurse, will stay.

by Lexi and Michael

Spring Birthdays

Andrew's birthday is April 24. He is eight. He had a Star Wars birthday party. He had a Star Wars cake. He had a Star Wars everything! Andrew had two other parties.

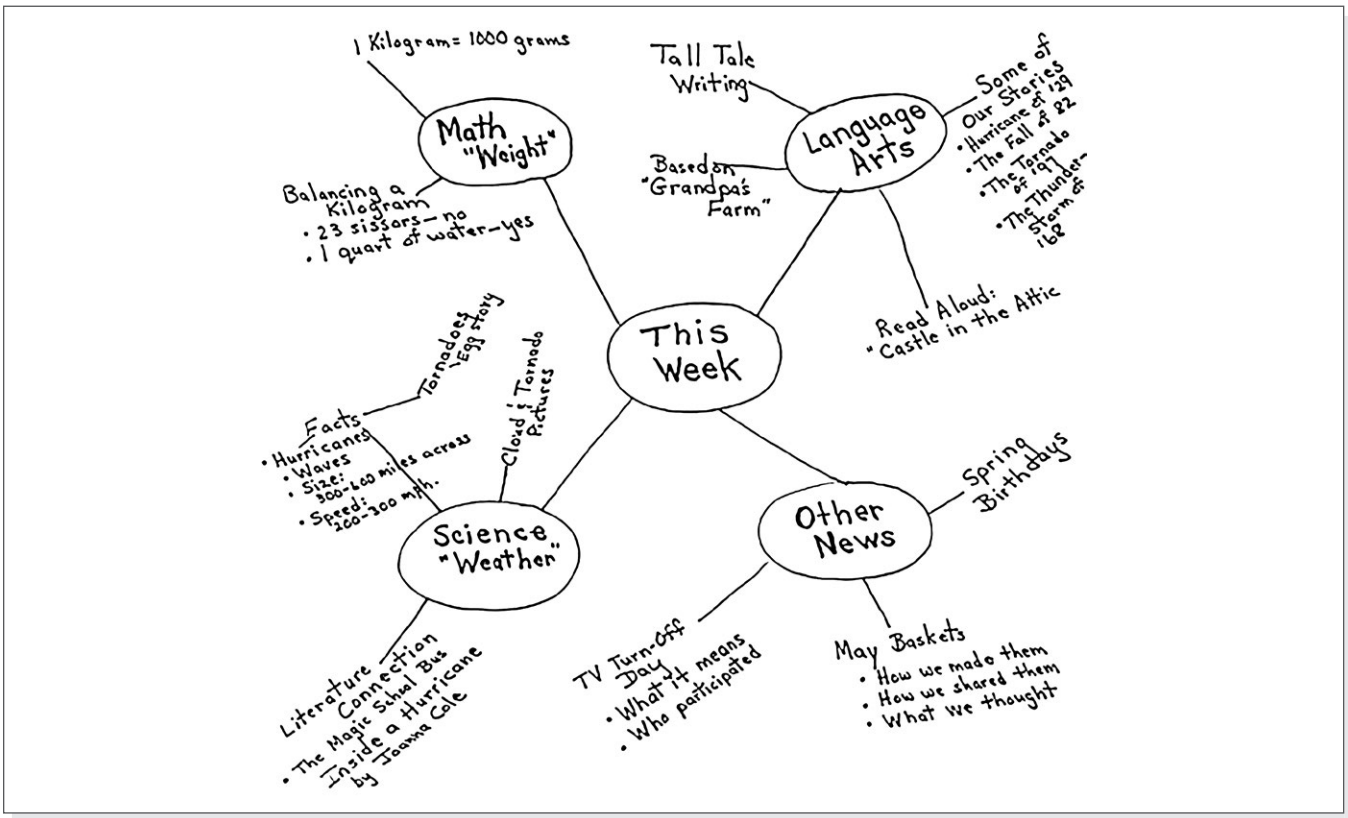
Alethea is going to have a sleep-over in a tent. Her birthday is May 7. She is turning eight. She is going to have two parties.

by Alethea and Andrew

Anecdotal note foci varied. Some addressed process. For instance, I might note a first-time contribution by a shy student during our large-group brainstorming, a strong writer's support for a writer lacking confidence, or questions generated about ways to grab readers' interest. My comments also related to students' newsletter contributions. For example, the article in Figure 1 about Ms. Frizzle of the Magic School Bus series might well have prompted the following entry:

> 5/2 Today Steven connected to our other MSB readings and to other books read. He's developing a writer's

Figure 2
Brainstorm Webbing for the Newsletter (Before Student Sign-Up)



voice. After telling that Ms. F's class is studying weather, he stepped out of his reporter role to comment to readers: "Of course you know that whatever they study they always end up at that particular place….Joanna Cole's books are more exciting than other books."

Although more formal structures such as rubrics could have been used as an assessment, notes seemed the best match, given my dual purposes of bringing closure to our week of learning and fostering a home–school connection through writing.

In addition to providing closure and helping students take ownership of their learning, this type of activity can address important writing needs, such as those called for by the Common Core (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). For example, students need to be able to "recall information from experiences" (W.2.8; p. 19), "write informative/explanatory texts" (W.2.2; p. 19), and "with guidance and support from adults and peers, focus on a topic and strengthen writing as needed by revising and editing" (W.2.5; p. 19).

Besides the writing value and confidence-building importance this authentic writing experience had for students, it was revelatory for me. Not only did I gain understandings to inform my instruction, but I also realized how essential the synthesizing was for students' learning. At first, it was a challenge for them to recall what they had learned over the course of the week. Although this may seem surprising, similar difficulty was evidenced more recently by some of my graduate students when they began to implement newsletter writing with groups of primary-grade students. Young children experience so much across the course of a day that, unless we make a conscious effort to help them solidify their learning, they may lose a great deal of it.

What Do We Know About Lesson Closure?

These experiences have piqued my wonderings about lessons, which end, but often without closure. By *closure,* I mean, as described in one Merriam-Webster

definition, a "satisfying ending" (Closure, n.d.), not just an ending. The medical definition of *closure* provides a useful analogy. Here, *closure* refers to "a drawing together of edges or parts to form a united integument" (Closure, n.d.), or outer whole. I believe that five minutes of closure can be sufficient pause to help students bring together key takeaways from the lesson, to think about what was important in the lesson, and to consider how their learning can help them be better readers and writers beyond this lesson and this day. This boost of awareness is important for ensuring that students realize why the activities they engaged in and the time they spent matter.

Curious to discover what we know about closure, I searched Google Scholar and the ERIC database for articles that included the search terms *lesson* and *closure*. It was evident that closure matters. For instance, there was a piece published in *Instructor*, a popular practitioner journal, titled "Closure: The Fine Art of Making Learning Stick" (Phillips, 1987). In it, the author noted that "closure helps learners know *what* they learned, *why* they learned it, and *how* it can be useful" (p. 37). However, research findings were extremely limited, and like the piece just mentioned, those that did surface tended to be from decades ago—the 1980s and 1990s—or they related to physical education and sports. One study is interesting in the insight it yields into the importance of student involvement. This secondary science study found that closure increased student performance on next-day and weekly tests of content when students were actively involved in the closure; namely, writing responses rather than passively looking and listening while the teacher read and projected key takeaways (Cavanaugh, Heward, & Donelson, 1996).

Most of the articles that I uncovered addressed teaching ideas, not research; online articles followed a similar pattern, although some of the ideas presented seemed worthwhile and engaging. Check out some of the 36 closure techniques presented by Wolf and Supon (1994), the 22 described in an *Edutopia* blog post (Finley, 2015), or the five technology-related ideas detailed by The Techie Teacher (Smith, 2016).

Because my quest to uncover a research base turned up few results, I reached out to colleagues in the field to see if I was overlooking something; their conclusions were the same. "So, why the dearth of research?" I wondered, when classroom practice does not validate that effective lesson closure is the norm. On the contrary, closure is often squeezed into a mere ending: "We'll take this up again tomorrow," or "It's time to put away ___." Do we assume that closure has been addressed by the investigations that followed Hunter and Russell's (1977) inclusion of closure in lesson design or that it is currently being taken care of by the widely accepted Understanding by Design model for instruction (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005)? Is there a perception that any ending is closure, or have we largely forgotten about closure? Regardless of the why, lesson closure is critically important. Students need closure to help them give their learning lasting relevance for their lives, to reflect, to solidify and internalize what they've learned (e.g., Lia, 2014; Pollock, 2007; Wolf & Supon, 1994). This requires more than statements by teachers of what has been learned and why; students need to be actively involved, as Cavanaugh et al. (1996) concluded.

With activities like the *Koko Report* newsletter, students engage in closure and synthesis through writing, which serves as a tool for their thinking and sharing of their thinking (Applebee, 1977; National Council of Teachers of English, 2016). The young newsletter writers were motivated through what Brophy (2008) termed *social milieu*, *expectancy*, and *value*. The social aspects of newsletter writing, the collaborative work, and the opportunity to talk through their thinking with peers and the teacher ignited students' interests. The weekly routine enabled them to know what to expect and to build a sense of competence. This sense of competence, the sharing of their product, and the collaboration made the experience pleasurable and one in which students were eager to reengage, thereby fueling a positive learning cycle.

Concluding Comments

As in a puzzle, an effective lesson has many pieces that must fit together. We typically give considerable thought to how we initiate lessons: activate or build background knowledge, teach essential vocabulary, engage learners, and set a purpose for the lesson. And we carefully select tasks or activities and texts for use during the lesson. But closure is often given short shrift or omitted entirely. We need to be sure we plan time to cycle back to the what, why, and how of students' learning to help them actively synthesize the parts into a whole. Lesson closure provides space for students to digest and assimilate their learning and to realize why it all matters. Closure is a component of planning and teaching that we can't afford to leave out.

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