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Students Writing for their Community

Katy Eck

Although the community can become involved in the classroom in numerous ways and with all disciplines, I found my way into the community through an advanced composition class writing project. I had been bothered by what appeared to be a real lack of concern for writing exhibited by my students. Time after time, after spending many evenings writing what I thought were helpful and supportive comments on their papers, I would notice, upon handing the papers back, that they quickly flipped to the last page, looked at the grade, then tossed the paper away, or buried it in their folders. I knew there had to be a better way.

I felt I could make my students' writing more relevant and more meaningful to them if they produced an authentic product with it.

During one summer I attended a conference on authentic and alternative assessment and, as the result of several workshop sessions—and my own familiarity with what seemed to work in my classroom, came up with the idea of making writing meaningful to my students by taking it out of the classroom and into the community. I felt I could make my students' writing more relevant and more meaningful to them if they produced an authentic product with it. A bro-

chure advertising local businesses seemed a perfect subject.

I had what seemed to me to be a marvelous idea; however, the problem still remained as to how to implement it. I was not a native to the city in which I taught, and I did not have much experience dealing with local businesses. I had to find a contact to help open doors for me.

Section I: Selecting the Businesses:

I began with a summer visit to the local chamber of commerce. Not only were they incredibly helpful in the selection process, but they asked to be one of the businesses to work with the class! After putting together a list of businesses, I sent out a letter, outlining the project and inviting them to be participants. Here is an example of a letter that I sent to my community businesses:

Dear _____ Chamber Members:

I am an English teacher at _____ High School, and this year I am trying an innovative approach to teaching writing in my advanced composition class. Rather than breaking the first semester into separate units to teach expository, narrative, persuasive, and descriptive writing, I will incorporate all of these into a semester-long project in which the students design informational brochures to promote area businesses. The project will benefit both the students and the businesses involved in a number of ways. The students

will benefit because they will apply skills learned in the classroom to actual professional situations. This project will enhance their communication, research, and writing skills, while increasing their involvement with the community. They will learn the importance of meeting deadlines and polishing their work to perfection, because the finished product will not only reflect on them, but also on the businesses they are representing. This will be an invaluable experience in that it will better prepare them not only for college, but life after college as well.

The businesses involved will benefit, also. You will get to know the teenage population in your community, and they will learn more about you. You will receive free, professional advertising through your brochure. Most important, you will gain the personal satisfaction of knowing you helped the youth of your community. You will not be disappointed if you decide to participate.

My students will be working in cooperative learning groups to complete this project. One group of 4 to 6 students will work on one brochure. In this way, it is easier for me, as well as the students, to keep in close contact with each business. This will also provide the business with a number of student contacts, rather than just one. In addition, I think the group will create a checks and balances system among themselves which will result in more professionally written brochures.

Being a part of this special project will involve a commitment of time from you. The students working with you will be conducting interviews with managers, employees, and patrons of your business. They will need to tour the business and have access to research material. At the end of the year, the students will make a presentation to your business in which they will present the brochure. We would like you to attend this event. When you receive the brochure, you will also receive an evaluation form; this will help me in assessing the project and implementing any changes that should be made for the following year. Please let me know if you are interested as soon as possible, as I need to introduce the project to my students the first week of school. I look forward to working with you this school year.

*Sincerely,
Katherine A. Eck*

I knew that for the experience to be meaningful for my students, we would have to work with businesses that took them, and the project, seriously.

All six businesses that I sent this letter to eagerly accepted my proposition. The businesses that I chose fit the wide variety of career interests that my students would have. I chose a hospital, two automotive engineering plants, the Chamber of Commerce, the local newspaper, and an elementary school. I was very careful to determine whether the businesses had a real commitment to the project or were just being accommodating. I knew that for the experience to be meaningful for my students, we would have to work with businesses that took them, and the project, seriously. Once the clients had been chosen the next step was to set up the working teams of students.

Section II: Selecting Core Cooperative Learning Groups:

The next step was to sell the idea to the students. None of them had come into the class expecting to produce a professionally-written brochure. For this reason, I gave them the opportunity to switch to a different section. I am happy to say all but one stuck with me. I explained to them that this brochure would encompass all of the skills they were to learn separately in my class. They would have to research, interview people, write letters, make phone calls, and so on. Then there would be drafts after drafts until they had distilled what their research had taught them down to a segment of copy that fit the needs of the format and was acceptable to the client. In addition, I also planned many additional individual assignments throughout the project. These assignments ran the gamut from those inspired by the project to the more traditional composition topics focused around the classical modes.

The core cooperative learning groups were initially formed by the student's area of interest. After we learned something about the business

and what they do, each member of the class wrote a letter to me, asking to be placed in a particular group. All students were asked to make a second choice in case there was an overabundance of interest in one business. For instance, if a student was interested in a career in any aspect of the medical field, s/he might choose to work with the hospital. If s/he expresses an interest in entrepreneurship, one of the automotive engineering companies would be the best choice.

"[It didn't matter] if we had differences with someone; we had to work things through. You have to go into it with an open mind and be willing to give things up."

After settling on one group for a while, students who felt that it really was not the place for them were allowed to change. In this case, I talked extensively with the student as well as the group. In most cases, I would encouraged the student to stay with the initial group. I would not allow changes after the first paper had been written. For the most part, students learned to put aside their differences, as we do in the "adult world" when there is a deadline to consider. Some groups became so close, in fact, that they formed a family away from home. As one student put it, "[It didn't matter] if we had differences with someone; we had to work things through. You have to go into it with an open mind and be willing to give things up."

Section III: Community Visitors in the Classroom:

To give students actual experiences, I had to provide them with a number of role models from the professional world. The business contacts provided excellent and authentic models. Business representatives visited the classroom on a number of occasions within the first few days of school to present themselves to the students. It helped the students to get a better picture of the business and the person(s) they would be dealing with if they decided to join that group. It also got

the business persons reacquainted with school life. After this initial visit, the business returned to discuss revision of each paper that would be incorporated into the brochure, and to discuss graphics, design, and layout. Finally, the business contact returned again at the end of the year for the brochure presentation.

These visits turned out to be more than informational for the students. They also gave them a glimpse of the larger world beyond their school. One of the entrepreneurs talked about the struggle of owning a business and held the class spellbound when he discussed going bankrupt, filing for chapter 11 and then fighting back year after year to regain what he had lost. Many eyes were opened that day and in the days after because of the straight talk students got from the clients.

The students must also call on the businesses several times during the semester. They tour the business, talk with the employees, gather information, and interview patrons. This authentic research replaces the traditional research they would normally do in the school library. Going out into the professional community also is a revelation to many students. Several members of the class complained to me when they visited the automotive parts manufacturer and were not treated in as special a fashion as they had expected. They were actually asked to wait, then made to wear hard-hats and safety glasses before they could tour the plant. Imagine! Being treated like ordinary people when, after all, these were seniors!

The printing and graphics person turned out to be a crucial part of the project. We worked very closely with this individual during the entire process. He came to the class on many occasions to show students different paper, fonts, and graphics they could use in the production of their brochures. He was helpful with writing headings, subheadings, titles, and with placement of pictures, maps, and other graphics that were incorporated into the brochures. In fact, if there isn't a knowledgeable, cooperative printing professional available, it would be wise to reconsider the whole project. That's how important he was to our success.

Section IV: Fundraising:

In order to make the project as close to an actual professional situation as possible, I turned the fundraising aspects over to the students as well. They had to find a way to pay for all of this professional printing. First, the class held a brainstorming session in which each group discussed the best way to raise money. After they brainstormed within the group, everyone shared their ideas with the entire group. Each group should be responsible for holding their own fundraisers, usually outside of school hours. My students came up with several of the usual ideas for getting money, but also some novel ones: bottle drives, candy sales, bake sales, a haunted house, and a car wash. The clients we had chosen worked with us, as well as several other local businesses.

The easy way to raise money would be to accept a donation from a generous parent, but, while this is tempting, it teaches students little about how the business world operates. Parents who are eager to help should be encouraged to become involved with the fund-raisers. One father in our project donated lumber for my students' haunted house and then helped them build it. Another parent donated towels to our car wash, and many families brought over a caravan of cars. There are numerous ways for parents to help, while still providing the students with the opportunity to raise the money themselves.

Section V: The Presentation:

The day our pamphlets arrived, hot off the presses from the print shop, my students stood gazing at them with surprised awe. A great sense of relief and excitement filled the class. Still, the job wasn't over. They had to plan a reception

during which they presented the brochures to the clients. Once again, they brainstormed in groups and formed committees. They wrote invitations, ordered refreshments, chose emcees, and decided on a place in which to hold the presentation. As a whole group, they had to write and design an evaluation form for the business contacts to fill out after the presentation. It is always nice to have recognition for a job well done, so we decided to invite the local press to come out and cover the story.

"We had to make the business look good, and if we didn't make the pamphlet look professional, then we would ruin the reputation the business has."

The students came away from this project with a tremendous sense of accomplishment, as well as a published piece of writing. They gained autonomy and learned to care about the product they were creating. One student commented, "We had to make the business look good, and if we didn't make the pamphlet look professional, then we would ruin the reputation the business has." Such comments made me feel the extra hours spent organizing this project were worthwhile. The class got a better understanding of their community and adults in the community got a chance to see young people in a positive light. Along the way, my students became better writers and learned a lesson about writing in the professional world that will stay with them far longer than any comment I could have written on their essays.