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“You’ve Got Mail”: Extending Literary Responses Through E-Mail Dialogues

Susan Steffel and Charles Steltenkamp

Like most English teachers, we are constantly searching for ways to engage our students with literature and to help them create authentic responses to their reading. It was this ongoing quest that led us to connect students in a high school novels class at Troy High School (THS) with students in a secondary English methods class at Central Michigan University (CMU). They dialogued through e-mail about the Judith Guest novel, *Ordinary People*. While the project involved some preliminary groundwork and had some pitfalls—we hope others will avoid them through our mistakes!—it has facilitated genuine, insightful, and positive response to literature.

Ordinary People is used in “American Classics,” an elective novels class at Troy High School. We agreed on this common text for the project, and it was added to the methods class reading list at CMU. While finding a common text was relatively easy in our project because we picked from what was available in the high school, we understand that choosing a text and teaching it concurrently between two classrooms could be challenging. Whether it is between two secondary classes or a secondary and college class, some flexibility is necessary to begin.

Having established a text, we then created a daily lesson plan packet for both classes including discussion questions and an assigned reading schedule. This allowed students to share a common classroom experience about the novel, but necessitated some disciplined planning to make sure both teachers stayed on the same schedule. Obviously, it was a challenge to keep plans consistent when the college class met twice a week and the high school class met each weekday. In addition, some juggling was necessary because the project overlapped vacation periods, which differ between school and college.

While secondary students were immersed in the literature unit, the university students participated

in conjunction with other readings. They were provided with the lesson plans, reading schedule, and discussion questions and were able to “follow along.” As a class, they periodically stopped to informally discuss the book, share personal responses, and share e-mail successes and frustrations. University students were asked to approach the novel on two levels. First and most important, they were directed to approach the novel as a reader who would share the reading with another. Second, because this was a literature methods course, they were also asked to occasionally step back and view the process through the eyes of a teacher. Teaching strategies became especially important when faced with an unresponsive high school partner.

We then took down e-mail addresses from each of our students. Predictably, most of the high school students used home e-mail addresses, while the college students used campus e-mail access. In both cases, however, it was necessary to assign school e-mail addresses to students who did not have home access. The high school students who used school e-mail were given 10-15 minutes of class time twice a week to make sure that they had ample opportunity for participating in the project. Students were paired randomly between the two schools. The higher number of students in the college class meant that several of the secondary students had more than one partner. While these uneven matches had their advantages by providing a greater variety of response, some high school students later felt overwhelmed by the additional number of transmissions generated by two partners. Likewise, some of those university students who had to share a correspondent felt a bit slighted.

We recommended—and the students were quick to agree—that the first contact should be a “get acquainted” message: they exchanged basic life information and interests. “Like you, I’m really excited

about this; it sounds like a lot of fun versus writing essays every night or some other equally boring thing”(THS). Not surprisingly, many students based subsequent reactions to the reading on their personal experiences as well as those of their partners.

Because we teachers wanted to observe the nature of the non-teacher directed discussion, we did not dictate the nature of the dialogue. We particularly wanted to allow our students to direct their own conversations. Several students responded to class discussions in their e-mail dialogues and, since they followed the same reading schedule, were free to move their responses in any direction they wished. Some commented on their difficulty with the dual narrative in the novel. “Another thing that I found confusing at first was the way the author changes from Conrad’s point of view to his dad’s”(CMU). One commented on the author/point of view connection. “I thought it was pretty amazing how Guest, a women well into her forties when she wrote the novel, could delve so deep into the adolescent male mind . . . neat trick”(THS). As expected, the most frequent e-mail discussions concerned character motives. “His [Conrad’s] grandma is almost worse than his parents. His poor grandpa is trying to control what she says, but she just keeps criticizing Conrad. She’s definitely not how I would picture any grandma”(THS). “If I had to live with a mother like Beth, I would feel left out and neglected also”(THS). Through considering how the characters reacted, the students took a closer look at their own worlds. “It’s a very interesting novel but awkward at the same time. Everyone has a different way of dealing with death, but the awkwardness of the story is that you have three people trying to establish order back into a family of their own, but yet their paths don’t cross”(THS). One of our concerns was that the students would spend more time chatting about issues unrelated to the text. On the contrary, they seldom conversed about their personal lives, except to make connections with episodes in the novel. “Why is it so easy to blow off our parents? . . . I fought for freedom for six years. Now that I have it, I almost miss them worrying. . . Conrad smells rejection. Maybe I’d bail too”(CMU).

An obvious challenge to this project is the technology. Lack of equipment was a problem. We readily understand that classrooms without similar resources are limited in duplicating our efforts. Moreover, even with these resources, students in both our classrooms complained of “vaporized” messages, slow transmissions, and lack of computer knowledge. “I felt as though I was simply talking to myself when I wasn’t receiving any messages. . . because I was unaware of the technical difficulties”(CMU).

Communicating over a computer network is as easy as using a phone to some but still an unnerving prospect to others. We were surprised at our students’ lack of computer skills, given the publicity about computer-literate students. Many students had never used e-mail or even activated their school-provided ac-

counts. In the future, students’ advanced computer skills and more accessible technology will ensure smoother e-mail correspondence.

Also, in the vein of “you can lead a horse to water,” a few students in both classes had disinterested partners who either did not respond regularly or did so with minimal effort. While most students were enthusiastic participants, some were not forthright in their efforts. Our grading system awarded a set number of points for a minimum of two weekly contacts—not a rigorous grading scenario. We chose to downplay the grading procedure because of the project’s experimental nature and because our main concern was establishing and maintaining contact between classes. University students were required to make at least two contacts per week and earned a percentage of their overall semester grade. University students were also required to review their correspondence, reflect on it, and draw conclusions about the nature of the discussion. A grading system which evaluated the quality of responses may do more to stimulate the less-active participants.

In replicating this project, we would also suggest beginning e-mail correspondence prior to the shared reading tasks in order to get as many technology bugs as possible worked out ahead of time and to begin building trusting relationships.

To our satisfaction, several students continued their dialogues over other books after we ended our three-week project. These students—and others who did not continue their efforts—were disappointed that the project ended just as they were becoming comfortable in conversing with their partners. “Well, your e-mail assignment is over this week. It has been fun hearing from you. If you want, I think it would be fun to keep e-mailing”(CMU). By the students’ own admission, a longer duration for the project may facilitate lengthier and more in-depth dialogue. Perhaps partners could continue their dialogue outside of class on a second novel chosen together from a shared list.

While our two classes exchanged group photographs, we did not set up a meeting between them. Several students mentioned that they enjoyed the anonymity of the computer screen; they were free of the self-consciousness that can come from face-to-face discussions. Furthermore, the students valued the benefits of varied settings (high school vs. college, different school/town environment, different ages between partners). This variety helped them to share more genuine responses and see literature through someone else’s eyes.

Obviously, a direct benefit of the project is students being introduced to e-mail correspondence. Yet, the project also allowed both high school and university students to hear other voices in actual reading experiences. They were able to test their responses to literature with a live audience, albeit through cyberspace. It also allowed pre-service students to try out a few techniques of literature discussion on actual student participants, and introduced these as-

piring educators to the concept of teacher as researcher.

At the completion of the project, the university students reviewed their correspondence and drew a number of conclusions. From the perspective of concerned educators, many took responsibility for their partners' lack of engagement. "I asked _____ a lot of questions, and maybe I shouldn't have"(CMU). "_____ answered my personal questions in short form. I do not think he was really interested in telling me about his life. If getting personal was not in his plans, that was fine with me"(CMU). Others realized that the high school students needed more time to develop the trust needed for a meaningful conversation. "I became aware of the importance of establishing trust and openness with others in sharing personal experiences and responses. I was able to practice making connections and creating meaningful questions"(CMU).

The project not only gave pre-service teachers an opportunity to connect with a secondary student, it reinforced the value of the reading/writing connection. "I know that I have a greater understanding of the book because I got to talk to someone, tell my reactions, and hear her reactions. Just writing down my reactions to the book really helped my understanding"(CMU). On the whole, the university students felt that, although not as positive as they had hoped for, the e-mail project was entirely suc-

cessful. They were impressed with the high school students' sophistication and maturity as well as their insights into literature. In short, these university students began to view themselves as teachers who through their actions and classroom activities contribute to the success of their students' learning. "I think that if nothing else, I got the opportunity to see that not all students are going to be responsive to me. I have to be able to make connections with students on a more personal level"(CMU). Pre-service teachers gained the valuable revelation that not only will their students learn from them, but they will learn from their students.

All told, the benefits both direct and indirect, far outweighed the negatives. We are anxious to revise the plans and try it again.

About the authors

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