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An Interactive Writing Project With A Very Special Audience

Celeste M. Crouch

Emily Dickenson, Horace Walpole and Cicero shared a life-long avocation. They were all prolific letter writers. Dickenson's fame began, in part, after the publication of two volumes of her letters. Walpole wrote over three thousand letters, providing historians with an in-depth look at Georgian England. Perhaps Cicero's most understandable writing was the letters he wrote to his brother. What these great writers recognized was the value associated with corresponding with others. They would have agreed with John Donne's statement, "Sir, more than kisses, letters mingle souls. For thus friends absent speak." The interactive writing unit which follows was designed to have students also experience the benefits of personal letter writing.

The focal point of this writing unit then was a penpal exchange. My classes consisted of ninth and tenth grade students who were primarily average and below average readers and writers. To capture their interest in the project, I decided to look for students who were older or younger in age and who attended schools which were significantly different from the suburban, culturally diverse high school my students attended. The reasons for connecting students whose ages and educational settings varied from my students were twofold. The age difference would prompt students to consider their audience more carefully and to write either in a more sophisticated or simple style, depending on the age of their penpal.

Secondly, pairing students up who were attending very different educational institutions required students to stretch themselves beyond their own personal universe, their school, and to imagine life from another student's perspective. Therefore, the goals of this writing project were to improve my students' writing, interpersonal and reflective skills, and to increase their knowledge of other people and educational settings.

The first penpal connection was arranged with a class of secondary English Education majors at MSU. Two of my other classes were matched with a large business class at the Ingham Intermediate School District Career Center. Another class was paired up with a third grade class in Morrice, Michigan. These classes each met the established criteria, penpals of different ages and very different schools. There was one other feature to selecting these schools. Each one was also close enough, in terms of proximity to East Lansing, that there was a chance that each of the penpal groups would eventually get to meet.

Getting Started

At the outset, all the teachers involved agreed upon certain guidelines. Students were to write a letter once a week. It was thought that the more frequently letters were sent and received, the more quickly we would begin to see results. We agreed to give the letters priority and to keep the

turn around time to one week. However, the exchanges were not that frequent with the Morrice third graders, simply because writing takes more work for younger students than older students and thus, it was thought, they needed more time between letters. Secondly, we matched the students up randomly. We did not try to judge who would make good pairs. Rather, one of the overriding principles in the exchange was that it was the differences which would stretch the students' interpersonal skills. Third, we read each letter before it was sent. Even though students sent their first draft letters, we needed to monitor the students' writing to determine if their skills were actually improving. When students seemed to be having some writing difficulties it was noted somewhere other than on the letter. Comments and suggestions for improvement were made to students one-on-one. A set number of points were assigned when a letter was completed and letter grades were not assigned. Fourth, the students were given the latitude to decide what to write about. Topics were not assigned. It was thought that attempting to direct what the students wrote about violated the intent of the project, for students to learn how to relate successfully with another person. However, teachers readily suggested topics if an individual student got stuck. Language ground rules were in place from the beginning. Inappropriate language or profanity were not permitted. Fifth, all the teachers agreed that every effort should be made to get the students together to meet at the end of the project.

To get the exchange started, my classes and I spent some time discussing what constituted a good personal letter. I reminded students that personal letters are like telephone conversations. On the phone, there is a dialogue in which people stop and start, ask each other questions, make comments about what the other person has said and generally act interested in the other person. Personal letters work the same way. Interspersed between what the writer wants to tell about themselves should be questions and feedback about what their penpals have stated in their letters. Questions and comments convey a genuine interest in the other person, and lie at the heart of the letter exchanges intrinsically moti-

vating feature. Everyone likes and needs attention. When a student complained that their penpals didn't ask them any questions but rather only wrote about what they were doing, I recommended that my student ask even more questions. If their penpal still didn't get the hint, I let the teacher know so that she could convey a quick letter writing tip to the appropriate students. Another frequent complaint was that a letter was too short. I suggested cranking up the feedback, asking even more questions, to draw the penpal out. Usually this suggestion worked and as the semester progressed, students wrote longer letters and the tone of the letters became friendlier and more personal.

**"Have the letters come yet?"
became the first question of the
day.**

I experienced plenty of special moments throughout the exchanges. After some initial questions, students quickly became very tuned into the letter writing. "Have the letters come yet?" became the first question of the day. When the letters did arrive and were passed out, students seemed riveted to their letters, carefully reading and rereading, sometimes smiling but always totally focused. I allowed class time to write responses back. Students would eagerly get right to the task, writing one to two pages without fussing about length. No student ever refused to write. In fact, because of uneven numbers, eight of my students volunteered to take on two penpals to insure that everyone got letters on the other end. A few of my more recalcitrant students wrote their penpal letters every week yet never produced any other writing for me the entire semester, a testament to the engaging and motivating qualities associated with these letter exchanges.

Benefits

Students gained a great deal from this project. First, their writing skills improved. They had to consider their audience, one of the first tenets of good writing. Their letters needed to reflect an

interest in their penpals. How well they were able to project this interest and understand their penpals perspective had a great deal to do with the quality of the letters they received back. Thus, the evaluative nature of this writing activity was built right into the exchange. If students wrote a good letter, they would very likely receive one. Students had to consider style and their choice of words. Those writing to the MSU seniors were very conscious of how they expressed themselves for fear of sounding "dumb." Some students tried to include vocabulary words we were learning in class to give their letters a more grown-up tone. The class writing to the third graders tried to write about things they thought younger students might be interested in. Students wrote one letter a week for practically an entire semester, so the exercise gave them consistent writing practice. The students themselves were able to see improvement. One of the students commented, "By writing more and writing to someone who has to understand what you are saying, especially a future to be English major, my writing got better." Another remarked, "Every writing I do enhances my skills. The letters gave me ideas I hadn't thought about before."

Second, students got to meet a person through letters, someone very different from themselves. "First time I ever met a person through writing," was how one student put it. Each MSU senior was able to get to know a real high school student. My ninth and tenth graders got a peek at the stressful lives of college students. One student said, "I learned that college is hard work!" The exchange with the Career Center students allowed my suburban, ethnically diverse, students to learn how the Career Center worked as well as about the lives of older high school students who lived in small outlying communities. The Career Center students likewise got to know students who live in a college town, very likely from culturally different backgrounds from their own. With the third graders from Morrice, the same experiences took place. Students got to know other students whose backgrounds more than likely were very different.

"Every writing I do enhances my skills. The letters gave me ideas I hadn't thought about before."

Third, students improved their interpersonal writing skills. They were expected to relate personally, in writing, to someone very different from themselves. They had to move out of the egocentric world of adolescence for a few minutes each week to legitimately consider and successfully relate to someone else. "I learned how to open up and make a person open up, even when I barely knew him," was how one of my students put it. Another student stated, "I learned how to introduce myself through writing and how to ask questions my penpal might be interested in answering."

Fourth, students increased their ability to reflect. Students had to look back at their week, consider what they had been doing, decide what they wanted to share, and how they wanted to characterize their activities and concerns. This reflection is similar to journal writing but with an added component, a person who will be reading the letter and then writing a response. This component requires of the writers even more reflection and consideration of how best to describe what they want to share. As a consequence, the reflection is intensified and self-evaluated much differently than in journal writes and perhaps, as a result, has a greater impact. A couple of students captured the reflective aspect of this project well. "Penpal writing wasn't like an assignment. It was like a time to collect your thoughts and tell someone," one stated. Another said, "It gave me a chance to really feel comfortable with myself and my feelings."

Fifth, students got a chance to work on their problem-solving skills. Often, penpals shared their problems in their letters. Social difficulties, frustrations with parents, academic troubles, the "stuff" of a student's life were written about, usually with emotion. On the receiving end, when students realized their penpal was dejected or feeling down, they would make suggestions, offer advice, or share similar experiences. One of the Career Center students wrote a particularly mov-

ing letter of support to one of my students coping with major problems at home. She'd been there, she said and survived. "You can too!" was written in big, fat colorful markers. These exchanges offered students a chance to unload and reach out, to give and receive, and to ultimately realize that they were not the only ones out there struggling with problems.

The culminating activities for the penpal projects were the all important get-togethers where the students actually got to meet their penpals. Twice we scheduled penpal parties at my home, where students met each other. We also took a trip to the Career Center where another group of penpals got to see each other for the first time. Were these events a success? I wish you could have been there! Friendships, begun through the written word, were extended at these gatherings. At one of the evening affairs in my home, ninety percent of my students attended! That's a better percentage than I average in my classes! Students came because they wanted to meet the person they had gotten to know so well on paper. These gatherings were a delight. The most frequent suggestion for improving the project was to have more of these get-togethers.

Student Reactions

Have you ever had a student who was *not* in your class ask if there was any way they could participate in the project *your* class was working on? Sound farfetched? Well, it happened to me not long after one of my classes had begun corresponding with the MSU seniors. One day a student I did not know approached me in the hall and asked if there was an extra MSU senior who needed a East Lansing High School penpal to write to. He had heard about the project from his best friend and wanted to get involved. As luck would have it there was an extra senior, and I was able to work the student into the project. The arrangement was fairly simple. The student would stop in my room on the day the letters arrived to pick up his letter and then return his letter to me the next day. Of course, this student received no formal credits or grades for his work. His rewards were strictly intrinsic, improved skills and an

understanding of how one can take charge of one's own learning, even in a school environment.

The student evaluations were designed to elicit the students' reactions to the project. The students were overwhelmingly enthusiastic and stated in a variety of ways how the exchange benefited them personally. The last item on the evaluation form asked students to rate the exchange in terms of its educational value to them. Five was the highest number a student could give. The project consistently averages approximately 4.5 from all the different groups involved.

Suggestions:

If you are considering implementing a similar exchange, here are some other suggestions:

1. Don't have students send pictures initially. We live in such an image-conscious society that how one relates to others is very dependent upon peoples' appearance. Good looking people are given a tremendous edge. Let the students shape their impressions of their penpals without the baggage of their actual image. After about seven letter exchanges, one of my students asked, "Would it be impolite to ask my penpal what race they are?" My response was that it certainly would not be impolite. To myself, I added, thankfully, at this point in their already established relationship, that piece of information more than likely would not be significant.
2. Consider doing a penpal exchange with the teacher you have teamed up with. Your own exchanges will help you identify better with what your students are experiencing. Some of the same benefits they are acquiring will likewise come to you. Best part is that you too get to make a new friend.
3. If you choose a class which is reasonably close, make every effort to arrange a penpal meeting at the end of the exchange. Your students will never forget the experience, nor will you.
4. Make every effort to keep the exchanges frequent. Good things won't happen as quickly if letters are received once a month or even less often. Letting too much time

elapse between letters detracts from the exchange, making it more difficult for students to relate successfully. Try to find a teacher who will agree to a weekly turn around and then work hard to stick to this schedule.

Conclusion

Good writers develop by writing. Dickenson, Cicero, and Walpole enhanced their writing skills by writing letters. So, of course, did many of the world's great writers, who also produced volumes of correspondence over their lifetimes. Perhaps it was not their genius for writing which compelled them to write these letters but rather their understanding of what letter writing could do for them as writers and thinkers. They must have understood that the act of engaging in frequent, written dialogue with others would help keep their own works of fiction and non-fiction more fresh, insightful and creative. For some master writers, their letters are considered their *very best* work. So try not to view this penpal exchange as somehow frivolous and an instructional lightweight compared to other types of writing instruction. It is a misconception to think that good writing instruction must always include multiple drafts, peer editing, furrowed brows and frustration.

Just as the great masters of literature understood for themselves, writing letters will make your students better writers. The exchange will also make your students more socially adept and reflective. It will serve to broaden their world just a bit, and perhaps make them more tolerant and compassionate individuals. It unquestionably will make your classroom a more fun, interesting and exciting place to be, a place in which all of your students can look forward to some very special personal attention at least once a week. The following comments were written by a Morrice Elementary School third grader who along with her penpal enjoyed including picture doodles and drawings in their letters to one another. Her thoughts are insightful and capture the essence of the experience. I hope you will seriously consider capturing the essence of this letter exchange for your students, too.

"It was fun writing to your students. It was a little different than writing to people our own age. But still fun. My penpal made me realize some things. She draws as good as me! And she is older than me! And I always thought that I was bad at drawing but I guess I'm not so bad. It is fun to write to someone older than me because it tells me what my life will be like when I get older and it also is just plain fun."