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Collaboration With Strangers: A Middle School Teacher Research Project

by Susan Sobota and Amy Voigt

In the summer of 1992 we met as fellows of the Eastern Michigan University Writing Project. Middle school teachers always find each other. We're the ones with the wild look in our eyes and the acerbic wit. When you're surrounded by puberty, anything goes. Susan was beginning her fifteenth year of teaching, and Amy was about to embark upon her second.

Like all National Writing Project (NWP) Summer Institutes, ours focused on three strands: teacher as writer, teacher as consultant, and teacher as researcher. The NWP assumes that teachers of writing must also be writers themselves in order to experience what they ask of their students, and that teachers are the best teachers of other teachers. Our research project for that summer became "Collaboration with Strangers."

We proposed to establish a cross-district, cross-community writing exchange project involving seventh grade students in Southfield, Michigan, and Ann Arbor, Michigan, who would act as editors for each other over the course of the 1992-1993 school year. Both classes would be set up in a writing workshop format (similar to Atwell and Reif). Each teacher would present students with ten to fifteen guided starts for assignments directly involved with the project, with encouragement and guidance to continue their writing in all genres with student-chosen topics. Students would have a home-team partner and a partner from the opposite school. At Thompson

Middle School, where Amy teaches, the schedule allowed for ninety minutes of reading and writing each day, with twenty-eight students. At Clague Middle School, Susan's twenty-six English class students were also members of her advisory group. They spent approximately eighty minutes a day together. Both classes were heterogeneous in ability and racially and economically diverse.

In seventh grade, students often seem to get caught up in their overriding adolescent concerns: friends, social situations, peer acceptance, not wanting to appear nerdy, not wanting to partner with so-and-so etc.

The students would communicate through written language only: fax, modem, and/or the postal service. They were also required to keep a portfolio and a journal of all communication and information generated with their cooperative peers—both for our research and their study.

We had tried peer groups in our own classrooms before with what we called "moderate success." In seventh grade, students often seem to get caught up in their overriding adolescent concerns: friends, social situations, peer accep-

tance, not wanting to appear nerdy, not wanting to partner with so-and-so etc. We were also concerned about keeping the entire class involved without having whole-group activities (i.e. worksheets). Another concern was the student whose skills were markedly lower than the rest of the class.

However, we believed:

- That vested kids produce good writing.
- Students should be provided with opportunities to discuss and clarify the research project. They were not our guinea pigs.
- Student writing should be based upon personal experience.
- Students should be given time to write in class.
- Students need a reason to write greater than "because it is due at the end of class."
- Students need reasons to read the writing of their peers and of "professional writers."
- Students need time to plan their writing by themselves and with others.
- An acceptance and respect for the middle school mind and behavior must be maintained in the classroom, not only by the teacher but also by the classroom community.
- Middle school writers appreciate being treated as "real writers."
- With the knowledge that others outside the classroom would read their work, we believed that they would perceive their writing as more important. We hoped.

The summer we wrote our research proposal we included five major questions upon which to focus:

1. How will the unseen editor affect a student's writing?
2. Will the writing improve in clarity when their audience is never present to ask questions or hear answers, except through written expression?
3. Will students successfully edit out-of-town work if they are unsure about their own work?
4. Will they take more risks with their writing when working with an unseen editor?
5. Will students take their own writing more seriously if they are to submit it to an unseen editor?

The assessment of our research was to be monitored through a variety of channels including student interviews, our own reflective journals, student writings, on-going student reflection of the research process, and expert assistance from Professor Cathy Fleischer, the Director of the Eastern Michigan University Writing Project.

At the outset, the students wrote letters of introduction; these samples are typical of those that they wrote to their potential partners:

Dear Writing Partner.

I am a 12 year old Clague School student. I have been living in Ann Arbor since I was 3 years old. I live with my mother, father, and little sister. I don't have any pets. I like to play tennis, read books, watch T.V. and play piano. I've been playing the piano for almost 6 years. I sort of like to write.

Sincerely,

Ramona

What's Up,

My name is Tony. I am 13 years old. I have 3 dogs and 1 fish. My hobbies include card collecting, bike riding and playing Nintendo. My favorite sports are baseball, football, hockey, and basketball. I am 5 feet tall, I have blue eyes, and brown hair. When I grow up I want to be a sports player or an artist. I am an only child, my favorite books are Charlotte's Web, Old Yeller, and Edgar Allen Poe's poem book. In writing I hope to accomplish being a consistent writer. My mom is nice but strict. Some of my best friends are Jeff, Chris, Mark, Jay, Wayne, and Lynell. My favorite T.V. show is "You Bet Your Life." What do you think about the Research program?

Yours truly,

Tony

Armed with folders full of introductions we sat down at Denny's and began to pair our students according to some "common" interests. Spreading our students' work over a large table, with mugs of strong coffee and the fumes of chicken-

fried steak to fortify us, we searched for those interests. Because this pairing occurred early in October when we didn't know many of our students well, some of the similarities were superficial at best, such as interest in basketball. Some reasons were as inane as spotty attendance patterns. Some were almost nonexistent, but everybody had to go somewhere!

The initial partnering seemed to go well. Our students were eager to know about this "other" person with whom they would be sharing their writing. Vernell from Thompson said to Amy with excitement, "You mean right now, as we're reading their letters, they're reading ours?" as if it were some kind of cosmic experience. As we passed out the letters, the classic almost universal "eeew" could practically be heard from Southfield to Ann Arbor and back again. There was a typical adolescent reaction: quick, I'll reject him/her before I get rejected. This reaction gave way to many questions as to why we had decided to saddle a particular student with the other. How people get married through the personal ads, we'll never know! The first impression on paper was very important. We had to cajole them into staying with the relationships to see what would happen during the year.

Next we asked students to reflect on themselves as writers.

Do I like writing?

I'm not really sure about this. I think I'm an o.k. writer, but I don't think I'd be a writer for a profession. Sometimes I get a lot of ideas, and sometimes nothing comes to me. The kind that I hate are the kind where you have to follow up on an already started story. I really don't mind writing, but I wouldn't want to do it every day of the week.

Smit

Writers have the power to enter another world at their fingertips. I firmly believe that writing is an escape.

Lori

Writing is fun sometimes. Other times I hate it, but when I write I go into a different world, once I get going I can't stop. I like to write in a quiet area, a place where no one can bother me like a closet. When I write and the phone rings I don't answer it. When I write I look like a mad scientist.

Gary

As often happens during the school year, the autonomy of these classes was disrupted. Two Ann Arbor students moved away, another moved in and out of special education; one Southfield student was promoted to the eighth grade; another arrived midyear. These movements were disruptive to our research project as they interrupted the formation of the trust we were trying to develop. It was risky not to have everything go as we had planned. How could we explain the changes? The students volunteered their ideas and suggested that we double up some groups. Although to us, as teachers, the continuity seemed sporadic, they enjoyed the empowerment of "changing the teachers' minds."

Many two-student partnerships did bond well together, as in this sample exchange of Yumiko from Clague and Vernell from Thompson. Vernell sent the following piece to Yumiko, which the latter decided to edit. The comments in bold are Yumiko's.

*Thompson Middle School
Vernell _____
Southfield, MI*

10-8-92

Dear Yumika, It's "O" not "A"

Hi it's me Vernell, and I'm glad we're partners Yumika. (Yumiko) We have to write an essay about a story that we have write to you. (What?) I'm black.

Sorry I didn't put that in the first letter, and the reason why is because I didn't want a pen pal to (not) like me for my culture. But I think you're not the kind of person to critlizee (criticize) me for my culture. Now that we know each other, I am ready to meet you. By the way you have nice handwriting.> Thanks!

My Story

Cats

Cats are fat and skinny
Cats are delightfully adorable
I just love like of cat <What does this mean?
But I don't have any kind of cats
But I want some

The End

I love it! Hope you like my story.

I will (would crossed out-then: sorry!

will is good) see you in March. I like the part "Cats are delightfully adorable"

Bye.

*Yours truly,
Vernell*

After the second (in all there were five) complete exchange, we were becoming discouraged about the sense of community that was definitely not developing. The comments were superficial. Where were the in-depth, serious writer-type comments that seem to pervade Linda Reif and Nancie Atwell's books? Was there really something so special about the east coast of the country that made their students better collaborators?

"I thought we were crazy, but they were wild and crazy."

At the suggestion of our colleagues from the EMU Writing Project, we decided to try video introductions. We reasoned that if our students could see their partners, they would be more comfortable helping each other to revise, rather than just make corrections on their papers. Both classes were videotaped during writing time. The Southfield class was more formally interviewed by Amy. The Ann Arbor class was taped during the controlled chaos of a typical writing work-

shop. Unfortunately, the videotapes did not assuage the anxieties about the writing partners. Rather, the disparity between the two videos increased the anxiety of the Southfield writers who thought the Ann Arbor kids were "rowdy." In his journal, Wayne from Thompson wrote: "I thought we were crazy, but they were wild and crazy."

This attitude continued until the high point of our research project: the face-to-face meeting with the writing partners. Amy was able to talk her principal, Mr. Michael Horn, into paying for a bus to take her students to Ann Arbor. Because a school bus was used, time constraints were severe, and the partners were only able to be together from 10:30 a.m. until 1:00 p.m. As the meeting day approached, anxieties rose. We asked the students to describe, in their journals, the concerns they had about going on the trip, what they were looking forward to, and what they thought they could learn:

"I will learn how Clague students work, their policies, and how different people write stories." Anthony

"Some concerns I have is that Rachel (my partner) won't like me and will think that my current story is too violent and maybe I'm crazy for writing such a story." Jennifer

"My concerns are if I'm going to fit in, if I can get along with them, if my partner likes me or if I will like my partner." Stacy

"I think I'll learn different writing skills. I can also get different ideas about writing from my friend." Donya

"I think I'll learn how to fix more of my mistakes by actually talking it out with my partner." LaQuesha

Since the Southfield students were the ones who were leaving their home turf to travel to the away team, they were very concerned about the differences between Clague and Thompson schools. Amy's students wanted to know if they had the same weather and T.V. shows in Ann Arbor as we did in Southfield. We had wondered at the outset of the research project how the unseen editor would affect the student writing. We didn't really think that it would affect the

student as a person first. Our students were much more concerned about whether they would be liked than whether they would learn anything about writing on that day we journeyed to the other school.

We envisioned the collaborative day to be a super peer-editing, revisionary, brainstorming event where students who were already bonded would excitedly work together. However, for most students, this was a social outing, with "fun" being their priority. They were looking forward to meeting their partners, much more so than doing any actual written work. Many Thompson students wanted to see what Clague looked like, to compare it to their own school. Still others from both schools just wanted to see this person whose writing they had been reading all year. It continued to remind us of personal ads whose authors require a photograph with each response. It's always better to see what you're getting yourself into....

Upon arrival, the students tentatively took their first steps toward each other, the Clague students guiding their partners towards the library where we were met by the principal, Mr. John Littlejohn. Shy greetings slowly gave way to boisterous banter about who had cuter guys. There is something about a school library which encourages adolescents to make noise. The students were then asked to revise and edit a new piece that most of them had brought to the meeting, and then to write a collaborative piece together.

Although many students spent a great deal of the hour socializing, we began to realize that this was only natural for seventh grade students, as well as for "real writers." When we would get together to discuss the research project, we first had to talk about our own lives, our families, our concerns. Real writers need time to talk about the process before they delve into the act of writing. Many groups eventually collaborated on a poem as in this example by Chris and Dan who each wrote every other couplet:

Friends

*Friends are people who won't let you down
Friends can make smiles when you frown*

*Friends will be there all the time
I had to make this poem rhyme*

*Friends are people who come once in a life
Friends can help fly a kite*

*Friends can be hard to find
Friends are always one of a kind*

*Friends like to talk, friends like to sleep
You rather have friends than be six feet deep*

*Some play sports, some do not
It's better to have friends than to not*

*Some have friends some don't
With no friends you can't cope*

*Life would be terrible without a friend
True friends will be there till the end*

*Friendship can't bend
And that's the end!*

In retrospect, we wish we knew at the beginning of the year what we later knew about our students at the end of the year. This is not a brilliant sweeping statement, but it should make sense to a teacher. Our students changed a lot over the course of the year, due in some parts to the writing project, but mostly due to the physical and emotional changes which occur in seventh grade. The students really did learn. Many became more observant, proficient writers due to the project and, also, because they wrote a great deal over the course of the year.

The students became more committed to their own writing. Slowly they realized that with continual drafts, their writing would improve.

Vested kids do produce better writing. Students will take their writing much more seriously if they write a lot because they get better at it with practice. Over the course of the year, many began to see themselves as writers:

I used to hate writing because it made my hand hurt, but I find that most of what I want to do for a living takes writing now. I look at T.V. and I see how they portray a writer's lifestyle. They make the writer seem slimy and strung out on booze, or they are noseey and stuck up. I think I like writing because it lets me be me. Andre

I myself love writing. Maybe because it lets me express my feelings whether I am writing a letter or writing a story. Jennifer

The students became more committed to their own writing. Slowly they realized that with continual drafts, their writing would improve. As teachers, we constantly deal with the MTV "sound byte" attention span of many students: Write it, turn it in, get a grade, never look at that assignment again. Suddenly they found that we would not grade a first or even a second draft, that re-writing and re-drafting did not mean copying it over. For some students this investment meant that they stopped asking us to check every paragraph to tell them "it was good." For some it meant that the papers they turned in were longer than half a page. And on an even more modest scale, for some it meant turning in anything at all.

Middle school writers appreciate being treated as "real writers." The knowledge that someone outside of school was reading their work encouraged some of the students to improve and to perceive their writing as more important.

Middle school writers appreciate being treated as "real writers." The knowledge that someone outside of school was reading their work encouraged some of the students to improve and to perceive their writing as more important. Yet the nature of adolescence is antithetical to the concept of collaborating with strangers. Adolescence seems to overwhelm any possibility of working with an unseen editor. These students did work with strangers and many of them succeeded. But more importantly, they carried away a positive attitude towards their classwork and their love of writing. If we were to do this project again, we would publish a collaborative book. Maybe that's next year's teacher research project!

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