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The Letter Exchange: An Articulation Idea That Works

Janis Flint-Ferguson and Jan Youga

As composition teachers, we are all aware of the need to make our students understand the importance of audience—how a specific audience influences everything from individual word choice to overall approach. Initially, we wondered if we could effectively teach our students this concept more effectively if we went outside the walls of our own classrooms and buildings. After doing just that, we would like to suggest a way in which college and junior high teachers can accomplish this goal through a cooperative effort. Our approach is simple, but very effective—a letter exchange between a freshmen college composition class and a seventh grade class.

The immediate benefit of such an assignment is that it is an excellent lesson in audience because students have to adjust their styles to suit the needs of much older or younger readers. But the exchange may be even more valuable because it establishes contact between the college and the junior high teacher. When a teacher is invited to take part in a college assignment, it is an open invitation to ask questions about and to critically examine what is happening in the college composition class. Teachers can see the whole continuum of instruction from the time junior high teachers introduce writing skills until they are fine tuned by college instructors.

Who were these people we were writing to? What would they think about a letter from us? What if we didn't have anything to say?

What follows is a description of the letter exchange, first from the point of view of the junior high teacher and then from the point of view of the college teacher.

From the Junior High Teacher:

The instructions for the letter exchange were simple enough. My Gibson City Junior High students were to write "Dear College Student" letters which contained two main parts: 1) an introduction explaining who they were, where they lived, and what they enjoyed doing; and 2) a series of questions they wanted the college students to answer for them. Since the college student would not know our address, my students needed to use the proper form for a "friendly letter" found in our textbook. The best, albeit problematic, part of the assignment was that an answer would be forthcoming. Who were these

people we were writing to? What would they think about a letter from us? What if we didn't have anything to say?

After brainstorming for answers to these questions, the actual writing took place. As with all of our compositions, I emphasized the importance of doing two drafts, but this time there was no resistance to the idea. Their first draft was evaluated for proper use of form and adherence to general instructions: at least two paragraphs, one about the writer and the other asking for information about the college student. The second draft was written neatly on notebook paper and put into a properly addressed envelope for delivery to the university class.

Although this letter exchange was part of a unit on letter writing, there was no doubt that this letter was different from any other letter assignment I had ever done. "The Teacher" was not reading/grading the letters; they were really in the hands of people who would write back. This realization created in my students an enthusiasm for the assignment that provided all the motivation they needed to complete it. They knew there would be a personal response—they would receive real letters addressed specifically to them—as an added touch, the professor was coming over to answer questions and visit with them while they opened the letters.

From the College Teacher:

When I received the seventh grade letters, I read them all and tried to pair up people with my Illinois State University students who seemed like natural correspondents: band members, stamp collectors, partners, artists. Sometimes I made a decision based on the difficulty of the task. Some of the shorter letters were given to my best writers who would accept the challenge of responding to a two line letter.

I have to admit this was one of the rowdiest days of the semester, and I thoroughly enjoyed their excitement and enthusiasm.

The next day in class, each student received one of the "Dear College Student" letters. I gave them time to read and laugh. There was a natural inclination to want to share, so we went around the room and read all the letters aloud. I have to admit this was one of the rowdiest days of the semester, and I thoroughly enjoyed their excitement and enthusiasm.

When they had settled down enough to analyze the letters, I began to help them focus on style and cognitive ability through such considerations as what the longest vocabulary word in the letter was; what the most complicated concept was; and what the longest sentence was and what kind of a syntactic construction it was. We also discussed the difference between a person's reading level and writing ability so they wouldn't talk down to the students. We then analyzed the seventh graders as audience and explored our relation to them. We considered what their areas of interest were, what they seemed to want to know about us, what their lives seemed to be like, and what our proper role was in writing to them. The students also started asking questions about what kind of paper they should use, if they should type, and if they could include pictures or send stickers. They also asked the inevitable question, "How long should this be?" But this time the question was not an attempt to find out how much they had to write before the assignment was "done," but a genuine concern about their young audience. They wanted to know how much a seventh grader would read in one sitting and what the attention span of that age group was. Questions like these caused them to start recalling their own lives at this age so they could better understand their audience.

I was amazed at the sudden concern they had for perfection, especially in proofreading, just because they were writing to real people.

Drafts of the papers were due for the next class meeting. We had a peer revision session

that day, and the finished letters (in envelopes) were due for the next class. We proofread (at their request) one more time before the letters were sealed. I was amazed at the sudden concern they had for perfection, especially in proofreading, just because they were writing to real people. A fragment for me seemed to be my problem, but a fragment for this audience was a reflection of their own self-worth.

I then had the joy of delivering the letters to the Gibson City Junior High students and seeing their reactions to the mail. It was a delightful and educational experience for me. Once the letters were opened, read, shared, and reread, the students wanted to know more about this group that had answered the mail. The questions were very concrete: What does this person look like? What class is this for? What is the greatest distance they have to walk between classes? What are college classes like? Some students also asked specific questions about references that had been made in the letters that they couldn't understand (what is an "hour?" What is "psych?"); I kept a list of these to share with my students so they knew just how often they had lost sight of their audience.

I realized that for many seventh graders, this was their first contact with college students and professors; and even those who knew college students wanted to verify information they had heard about college life. As I was leaving, the principal of the school complimented us on the exchange as a means of improving relations between the university and surrounding communities—a fringe benefit not in the lesson plan.

In class after the visit, the college students first wanted to know if their letters had been well received, but then their questions were very similar to those of the seventh graders: What do the students look like? What class is this for? What is the school like? They wanted to compare this experience with their own junior high experience, and as they did, they became more aware of the community outside the university, more aware of their real audience.

Follow-up for the Seventh Graders:

The next step for the seventh graders was a reversal of sorts. Once I realized the value of this

assignment as the capstone to a unit on letter writing, I also realized the value of doing a follow-up assignment to reinforce the skills they had just learned. The third grade teacher had been working on a much simpler letter writing unit in which students wrote a weekly letter to the teacher and the teacher wrote back. One week they wrote to us instead. Their letters were addressed to "Dear Seventh Grader" and followed much the same format as the first exchange—the third graders introduced themselves and then asked questions about life in junior high. Were the teachers hard? Did seventh graders really have to take showers after gym? Their handwriting was huge, their spelling was almost impossible to even sound out, and the third graders' questions had them rolling in the aisle. Was this how those college students had responded to their letters? That was a sobering thought.

Following the example of the college students, the junior high students wrote return letters to the third graders. They remembered to use a simpler vocabulary and discussed whether third graders could read cursive or if printing was needed. They shared their letters with other classmates to make sure they had said the right things in the right way. They included maps, drawings, and pictures to help the younger students get a better idea of what the junior high looked like, and did their best to set aside fears about teachers and showers. The seventh graders took their responsibility very seriously.

Follow-up for the College Students:

The follow-up assignment for the college students was reflective and analytical. Students were instructed to look over copies of their letters again and the ones from the seventh graders. After reviewing both letters, they were to write an evaluation of the appropriateness of their response and an analysis of what they had learned about audience from doing this assignment. It was at this stage that they began to articulate their new or improved understanding of how audience affects writing. For example, after completing the letter, one woman began to question her whole approach to composition. She said in her analysis, "The one thing I am finding out in

this course is that I usually write with no audience in mind—kind of a ‘to whom it may concern’ approach. I guess I really want to know if I am making any progress.”

This letter affects them as writers and as people because they recognize their ability or inability to touch someone else’s life with their words, as the following examples will demonstrate.

As this quotation shows, this assignment makes students of all ages think about themselves as communicators. This letter affects them as writers and as people because they recognize their ability or inability to touch someone else’s life with their words, as the following examples will demonstrate.

Results: College Student

Jack was a twenty-six-year-old freshman returning to school after a colorful eight-year absence. He had gone to watch repair school and mountain climbing school, had been on an Alaskan expedition to Mount McKinley, and just bummed around the country. In other words, unlike most freshmen, he had a lot to say, many stories to tell that went beyond prom night and dorm life. He was also very excited about starting college and very motivated to improve his writing. All these factors made him a model student, except for one problem.

Somewhere Jack had been taught one of the most stilted styles I had encountered since Henry James. He loved subordinate clauses, new vocabulary words, and tortured syntax. Although his stories and opinions could be compelling because of his experience, they often sounded painfully contrived because of his style.

I tried to get him to relax his approach, to write more naturally. My pleas fell on deaf ears. Whoever had trained him to worship obscurity had done an excellent job. Nothing worked to change him—until Dave’s letter arrived.

Jack was suddenly faced with the challenge of simplifying, not because I told him to, but because if he didn’t, Dave would not (perhaps could not) understand him. Jack was shocked at the limited vocabulary and short sentences of his audience. He was nervous about Dave’s lack of experience and about making a good impression. All these worries made him think, for the first time, not about how sophisticated he could sound, but about being clear, about really communicating, and about presenting a self that someone would like.

Jack’s letter to Dave was only somewhat successful and he knew it. But writing it changed his attitude—and his style. The difference can be seen in two expressive pieces he wrote, one before and one after meeting Dave:

Example #1: Upon starting my first year of watch repair school, I assumed I would graduate in a couple years and go back to the small town in Illinois where I grew up. My grandpa had a jewelry store there, and he was looking forward to passing the business on to me. It was a golden opportunity to become a successful jeweler.

However, as usual with me, events were to deviate from the expected. During some free time at school, I read a book that made an impressive impact on my mind and subsequently helped me determine how I wanted to live the rest of my life.

The book was a narrative of one of man’s early attempts to successfully reach the South Pole. I guess it was both the courageous character of the explorers and the awesome nature of that hostile land that so thoroughly exposed my senses.

Example #2 : (journal entry) You’ve been waiting for me to write to you for a long time now. How many times have you failed to listen to me when you knew that I was right? I look down the road to see what will bring you happiness three months from now or five years from now, but you are only interested in the present. You seek immediate pleasure because you think it will make you happy.

It usually does for a very short time, but when it is in conflict with me, it tears away at your self-esteem.

The difference in style between these two is obvious. Example #1 is filled with misused words, subordinate clauses, and a formal tone inappropriate for a personal piece. It also expresses important ideas in clichés such as “golden opportunity,” and in vague generalizations such as, “how I wanted to live the rest of my life.” The second piece is perfectly natural and very easy to understand. It has a genuine voice with no pretense and no desire to impress anybody. It was something Jack was incapable of producing before Dave.

Results: Seventh Grader

At the onset of the assignment the seventh graders usually asked one question: “What do I do that a COLLEGE student would want to know?” In this respect, Kent was a typical seventh grader. He was a fairly average student who made careless errors more from lack of interest than from lack of ability.

He had virtually no concept of audience and little desire to develop one. He did the assignment with an obligatory 2-3 paragraphs of generalized information. Information about himself included such tidbits as “twelve-year-old,” “seventh grader,” and “likes basketball.” For him our town was simply the place he lived, although he did mention the landmark “McDonald’s.” Basically, it was obvious that he had simply considered this another essay “to the teacher” regardless of the fact that this was a letter meant for a college-aged reader.

Kent read his response from that reader with the same interest as all the students had, but for him the sense of audience now became very real. Several days later, Kent came to me with a thick envelope, carefully addressed to his college student. He asked if I could take it to the college campus for him. I had warned my seventh-graders that the assignment was not meant to initiate “pen pals,” but I could see that Kent had a need to respond with a veritable packet of information which he wanted to share. I did not

ask to read it; after all, it was not “for me.” The intended audience was now a very real college student and Kent had obviously reacted accordingly. He had found an audience and with that “find” came more writing than he’d ever done for an assignment. When writing was no longer a contrived situation, Kent found that he did indeed have a lot to say, so much so that he voluntarily wrote another letter to his audience. For a twelve-year-old who only liked basketball and McDonald’s that was quite a step.

Result: Long-Term Interaction

Mary was a hard seventh-grader to understand. Although an A student, she was very serious and really kept herself apart from most of the other students. Toni, the college student who answered her letter, was unusual, too—a thirty-eight year old woman with two grown children, returning to college after a long absence. Toni was worried about how to tell Mary about her circumstances. As she wrote in her analysis, “The most difficult part of this writing assignment was trying to talk about my age without actually saying I am thirty-eight years old. But it was necessary so I could answer her questions about my family.” Mary and Toni were paired because Mary seemed mature enough to handle Toni’s unusual circumstances. However, when Mary received the letter, we worried a little about the decision. She seemed a bit taken aback by Toni’s age; while other students were oohing and aahing over letters from eighteen and nineteen year olds, Mary read her letter and put it away, seemingly displeased with the results of the exchange.

Those letters have been saved, savored, and shared. We have often wished that everything we taught could have as lasting an effect on students as those letters do.

But the next year we were in for a big surprise. Toni happened to meet Mary’s teacher, and they talked about the letter exchange. When the group

of now eighth graders was told about the conversation, Mary said she thought that the woman had written to her. The next day she brought in that original letter and she and her teacher had a great talk about the writer, what she was doing now and how they had become acquainted. Out of curiosity, we asked Toni if she still had her letter, too. She did, and we have since learned that most students keep those letters. For the seventh-graders, they are proof of what writing can accomplish, that it actually can bring a response. For the college students, the letters retain personal value, and they save them even when they throw out the rest of their papers from the class. Those who have talked to us about that assignment have agreed that they learned more from doing those letters than from any graded assignment they had ever done. Those letters have been saved, savored, and shared. We have often wished that everything we taught could have as lasting an effect on students as those letters do.

In addition, both of us had the opportunity to see the writing process at work in a new setting and to offer each other suggestions for improve-

ment. Working together, we were able to make our students see the necessity for prewriting, careful revision, and proofreading as part of considering the needs of an audience. These stages of writing came naturally for students when they were motivated to produce something of value. Grades alone do not provide such motivation, but interesting, challenging rhetorical situations can.

Finally, as we worked together, other teachers became interested in what we were doing and requested information on how to conduct such an exchange. Other students have even become interested; the roommate of one of the college students wanted to write a letter, too, although she was not taking the class! Articulation can mean more than occasional meetings at professional conferences. It can mean working together on projects of mutual interest in our own classrooms with our own students. Through such collaborative efforts as the letter exchange, we found that going beyond the boundaries of our own buildings had a powerful effect on our students' writing and their attitudes toward writing while both teachers involved greatly benefited.