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AUDIENCE MATTERS: A JUNIOR HIGH-COLLEGE PENPAL PROJECT

Margaret Tebo-Messina and Doris Blough

What we now refer to as "our penpal project" began with a serendipitous meeting and chance conversation about writing instruction. During that talk we discovered that even though one of us teaches seventh graders and the other college students, even though we are members of two "different cultures" who, it is reported, often have trouble collaborating (Schultz 145), as writing teachers we could nevertheless commiserate with one another.

Doris's seventh graders too often expected English to be a meaningless ritual, requiring them only to spell twenty words they couldn't pronounce, memorize homophones they couldn't define, or identify adjectives in sentences they couldn't even read fluently. For Marge's grade-obsessed college students, writing had become torture, a ceremonial giving-the-teacher-what-she-wants rather than an act of honest communication. And none of our students thought revision worthwhile: as Carrie, a seventh grader, once put it, "I don't write a paper and turn around and reread it. Cause I know what it is supposed to say." In short, before too many minutes had passed during that first conversation, we knew that we shared both a belief in the ability of our students and a commitment to changing their too-often negative and apathetic attitudes about writing. We decided to "do something together."

Our primary goal was to provide each student with a REAL AUDIENCE—that is, an audience they would treat as more authentic than "just the teacher." Penpals, we reasoned, would give the seventh graders a chance to correspond with real, live people from outside their classrooms—and not just people, but college students. For most of these rural youngsters, college was a remote place populated by adults who were going to make it big because

they were so "smart." As for the college students, we hoped to confront them with both the need to respond thoughtfully to another's writing and the need to revise for an audience that mattered.

Much has been written about how writing out in the world differs from school writing, how communicating a real message to a real audience contrasts with the typical school fare of writing for "dummy purposes" to a "dummy audience" (Mayher 3). In Britton's seminal study, *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)*, more than 2,000 student texts were examined and classified by purpose and audience. While students addressed small portions of their work to different readers (including themselves, a wider audience, and unknown groups), 49% of their texts were addressed to a "Teacher Examiner." This writing from a novice to an expert for purposes of evaluation, "writing aimed at a verdict" rather than at communication (Britton 70), is artificial and forced, rather than genuine and spontaneous. As one seventh grader put it, "Teachers love reading over and correcting things. Then you have to rewrite it. That don't do nothin' but mess up paper."

A steady diet of such composing for a teacher/ogre—real or imagined—lacks compelling purpose and severely restricts a writer's growth. Britton's work shows that students at the elementary and high school level need the opportunity to address a smorgasbord of audiences if they are to develop as writers; college students, we learned, benefit from the same opportunity. In the following pages we will briefly describe our project and offer suggestions for others interested in a collaborative venture, then summarize the project's results.

We agreed to exchange letters for a semester, but because we wanted to change our students' attitudes about writing, we knew that we needed a purpose beyond note swapping. Consequently, we required students to send their penpals working drafts of some class assignment—a poem or a persuasive essay, a short story or a riddle. By the end of the project, each student had given and received feedback on several letters *and* several drafts of a composition. The grand finale of the project was the seventh graders' campus visit to meet their penpals. The college students carefully planned and orchestrated the day so that they could show the younger students as much of college life as possible. Afterwards, the glories of the visitors' experience spread by word of mouth to other classes, making them the envy of the junior high school for days.

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How exactly did we proceed? In the suggestions which follow, we rather hesitantly offer a rough composite picture (our third project is currently underway) of our writing exchange. Teachers, we believe, realize that each situation is unique, requiring adaptations that only they can identify. Consequently, we encourage others seeking to replicate our project to negotiate their own "how to's," to adapt rather than adopt the following particulars.

1. At the beginning of the exchange BE SURE EACH PERSON SENDS AND RECEIVES A LETTER.

You may not be able to hold to this pattern throughout, but starting off right is essential, even with adults. Use your teacherly intuition to pair people ahead of time, or start by blindly handing out names to one or the other class. In either case, your students will probably want suggestions on how to approach writing such an unfamiliar audience. We have sometimes provided our students with writing profile questions and suggested that in addition to basic information about their hobbies and families, their experience with school writing would make a good common topic. They can tell one another who taught them to write, how they feel about writing, when, where, and how they prefer to write, etc.

2. MAKE IT EASY TO DO.

If the logistics of the project are cumbersome, you may be tempted later in the year to give up. We discovered that it took about two weeks to send a letter and receive a reply. For the most part letters were written outside of class as homework, though we always devoted some class time to mail call. Our students were always eager to share their letters with one another and often needed help in deciphering cursive or understanding diction.

One practical note: While our schools are in different towns, we avoided postage costs by prevailing on a private courier (a spouse) to deliver our mail. That way we had almost instant delivery service at a most reasonable rate—free. In fact, except for the extras on which individual students chose to spend their own money—phone calls, souvenirs, post cards—there was no cost at all. Our institutions absorbed copying and visiting costs.

3. HAVE A PURPOSE IN WRITING BEYOND THE LETTER EXCHANGE.

If your students don't have a purpose for writing these letters beyond "just writing them," the letters are likely to become trivial exchanges, repetitions of questions asked and answered. We wanted our students to experience that how they say something on paper does matter and that readers are real people with often rather specific needs. Consequently, after two or three letters had been exchanged and our students were comfortable with one another, we had them send drafts of whatever writing we were currently working on in class. We made no effort to prearrange the topic, content, or mode of writing shared, preferring to let our students experience a genuine audience reaction.

We did, however, require that they send their first, rough, working drafts as well as a later draft that involved serious revision. At this point (usually around mid semester), the college students knew that they were modeling the behavior of writers both with the changing drafts they sent and with the kinds of suggestions they made to their penpals. They took very seriously Marge's advice to respond to these young writers with the kinds of feedback that they themselves wanted as writers. Throughout the year Doris had been modeling the same kind of responding with her seventh graders, stressing the positive in their work, focusing on content, mentioning no more than two mechanical errors in any one draft—and only those that interfered with readability. The help Doris's students received from their college penpals, therefore, reinforced her own work with them.

4. MAKE THE PROJECT A PART OF WHAT YOU WERE GOING TO DO ANYWAY.

Don't make the penpal project an "add-on" to your other responsibilities. Be kind to yourselves and realistic about the time you can devote to a project such as this. The workshop format that we use takes weeks of modeling and propagandizing to introduce: students work in pairs or groups, brainstorming to find and expand topics, reading their work aloud, and listening to and questioning each other's drafts. Most of our students—sometimes we think all—find everything we ask them to do very peculiar indeed. Once we have established our workshops, however, integrating the penpal process is easy. Doris's seventh graders and Marge's college students

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(both freshmen and advanced classes) are expected to respond to their penpals as they do to their workshop classmates.

5. BE FLEXIBLE.

Somebody's going to get sick, move away, drop the course. When things like this happen, we simply make sure that every student is sending and receiving letters and drafts of writing. Even when our classes differ substantially in size, we keep going by having students write to more than one person. The first semester, several basic writers in the seventh grade had to double up and write to two people. They were thrilled with the distinction. Remember to be flexible in your dealings with one another too. Neither college nor public school teachers have time for detail-laden, heavily-documented, extra projects. We found that occasional Sunday night phone calls to supplement the notes we sent with the mail were sufficient to keep the project synchronized.

6. BE COMMITTED TO SEEING IT THROUGH.

If you aren't committed to the project, your students will know. If *you* don't value the writing exchange, the students certainly won't. As we see it, the experience is worthwhile in itself. "Success" may not be achieved in the terms you originally define, but we have no doubt it will appear in some form. After all, surprise is only one of the most positive characteristics of teaching, isn't it?

7. BUILD IN SOME TIME TO STEP BACK AND LOOK AT WHAT'S GOING ON.

Keep assessment of the project simple. Write down your observations in a journal. Ask questions orally, listen to what your students say when the mail arrives, and record it all. At the end of the term do some kind of assessment that includes written questions and prompts, particularly open-ended ones such as "When I first heard that we were going to write to college students, I thought..." and "While I was writing my first letter, I..." Keep copies of everything, including the correspondence. Later, a second or third look will give you a clearer idea of just what happened. The students, too, need the experience of stepping back and assessing what happened so they can get a larger view than just the one letter at a time they have focused on during the project.

When we stepped back from the first semester we were surprised to learn that our students' writing needs and responses were very similar. We had expected the college students might be blasé or bored by the whole idea, but whether they were freshmen or seniors certifying to teach English, they felt like Kay, who wrote, "I thought this was an exciting chance to help influence children and hopefully do some good." Marge's students were as excited as the younger writers who, when Doris proposed our plan, stared at her in disbelief. Sarah explained how shocked she was: "I thought to myself, 'College students writing to a short little whimp like me? She has to be kidding.' But after I found out that she [her penpal] was just as human as I was, I loved to write without feeling like a baby."

The two groups did for one another what we as teachers can seldom do, generating three interwoven benefits. First, our students ENGAGED each other as writers. Because they cared about being understood, they were motivated to pay attention to mechanics and content. Prompted to tell about themselves and ask their penpals to do the same, the seventh graders tackled the first letter with a will—for several minutes. Then the specter of "correctness" reared its head. Most of the seventh graders, unfortunately, had been subjected throughout elementary school to a "correctness first, content second" approach to composition. Now, suddenly, "correctness" was more than an arbitrary, teacher-dictated lesson; it had a place in a real-life activity. Doris's students wanted to send their thoughts to the college students, but they wanted to look good on paper too. They became concerned about things they dimly recalled from letter-writing lessons of earlier years: neatness and correct spelling, yes, even observing the margins, but also, "Just whose address goes at the top, anyway?"

The college students were equally worried about making a good impression. One of them put it this way:

I can't say that I have ever written to an unknown audience before....There were many things that I didn't write since I didn't know who I was writing to. Also, the things I did write, I worded in ways that wouldn't confuse or offend the person I was writing to— whoever it was.

For perhaps the first time, Marge's college students wrote not to a teacher, friend, or relative who knew them well and was a skilled reader, but to novices

who might not understand. Consequently, what they wrote and how they wrote it mattered. In spite of their care, however, the differences in ability were sometimes so great that misunderstanding arose for the seventh graders. After reading a paper on stereotyping, Kendra could only say that it was "something about stereotypes." It was clear to us that the students at both levels were paying attention to their writing as if it mattered.

The second benefit was the way the letter exchange also became very PERSONAL. Friendships developed as envelopes bulging with lollipops, gum, home addresses and phone numbers, invitations to basketball games, and pictures made their way back and forth between junior high and college. This one-on-one exchange transformed our incurious pupils into teachers and students of writing.

The personal touch was evident from the beginning in the seventh graders' efforts to not hurt the other's feelings and to do a satisfactory job: "I wanted to say the right thing," wrote one of them. "I was also trying to write neater than I ever have. All I wanted her to say about me is that she may be a smart child when she gets a little older."

The college students found their role of teacher unique. Bob, for example, wrote, "I was excited and impressed because the seventh grader wrote like she thought I was a higher being." Being looked up to, however, brought new and worrisome responsibilities which were taken very seriously: the hardest part of the project, in one student's words, was "to talk to [my penpal] about things that may [have] hurt her. This would include such things as informing her of mistakes in her writing and saying she should attend school more often."

Most important of all, our students DEVELOPED a more positive orientation to writing. Communication with real people for real reasons taught them that the writer's job is to make the reader's job easy. They learned that instead of meaningless ritual, writing was meaning-making. As Dave (7th grade) put it, "[The hardest part of this project] was writing down what I was thinking. It wasn't all just writing, it was put it in words too!" Writing, it seemed, was no longer an empty act of transcribing for the teacher, but a struggle to communicate with a real reader.

Our students also learned that, instead of a ceremonial giving-the-teacher-what-she-wants, writing requires effort. It became necessary for

them to revise, to work at spelling, to "stop leaving out words," or to "simplify." And for the first time some, like Matt, felt a new need: "I had to really think about what I was writing. I always try to think but this time I had to be sincere because an older person can have a lot of influence on a seventh grader." Apparently insincerity, fine for teachers and school writing, would not do for a real seventh grader.

Was our project successful? By the time those first introductory letters—so fraught with peril—were exchanged, our students were hooked. The project had created a "genuine social context, [without which] writing loses its function of communication and degenerates into mere exercises in which one is forced or encouraged to engage" (Black 233). Rather than coercing our students to finish their correspondence, we found ourselves badgered with inquiries about the mail: "Did our letters come yet?"

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