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A BRIDGE BETWEEN GENERATIONS: STUDENTS WRITING ABOUT ELDERS

William Palmer and Carol Bender

Older people have a wealth of stories to tell, feelings to express, and ideas to communicate, but they may lack an interested and encouraging audience...Because of the physical effects of aging and because our culture does not value older people, communication can be a major problem for many older Americans.

(Gillis 65)

In our English 101 College Rhetoric course, we wanted students to engage in acts of authentic communication with elders, to experience research firsthand without relying on written sources, and to have a special personal experience. To do this, we arranged for each student to interview an older person at the Michigan Masonic Home in Alma, Michigan. This off-campus activity engaged students in a language arts activity that took them out of the classroom in order to provide them with a significant rhetorical situation involving real purposes and audiences. English classes interacting with elders is not a new activity (Gillis, Fusco, Maglin, Farrell, Ede, Kirsznier). Active/discovery learning is not a new pedagogy (Dewey, Bruner, Whitehead). That social interaction helps produce cognitive growth is not a new idea (Vygotsky, Britton, Moffett, Boyer). But we have found a particular format that many high school and college English teachers could replicate to help students learn how to do research--and to enjoy the process.

Bill started this project last year. In Alma's spring term, a four week session in which students take only one course, he taught a section of English 101 with twelve students. Spring term is designed to involve students in unusual but significant academic experiences; many courses take place overseas or involve field trips around the state. Bill thought that having students interview an elder would enliven his course and challenge students to write in a different form. The project worked so well that Sue Metzger, a columnist for *The Morning Sun*, our local paper, wrote a feature

on the project and published two students' papers. This spring, when Carol's class joined Bill's, we reviewed the format to help it run more smoothly. What follows is a description of what we did.

We first contacted Teresa Turner, the Activities Director at the Michigan Masonic Home, a large, beautiful nursing home that resembles the Grand Hotel on Mackinaw Island. Because the project had succeeded the preceding year, Teresa was enthusiastic to do it again. We told her that with our combined classes, we had twenty-five students to interview elders.

Last year Bill's method for matching students with residents was casual and random. He brought his twelve students to the Home where twelve willing residents sat waiting in the lobby. As Teresa and Bill tried to match freshmen with elders, a male resident, James Comp, 89, suddenly pointed to a student and exclaimed, "I want you, the pretty one in the red sweater!" The student, Kerry, smiled and blushed. She walked over to him, and they got along fine—he escorted her outside to show her the nature trail he had helped develop on the grounds. A woman, 93, who had been an English teacher quietly asked if anyone was an English major. Shannon raised her hand, walked over, and introduced herself to the woman. After several minutes of uncertainty and rather awkward introductions, everyone had a partner. Bill made a mental note to organize the introductions better in the future.

This year we developed a two-page questionnaire for elders to complete in an effort to match residents with students. Residents were asked to provide the following information: name, date of birth, hometown, number of brothers and sisters, education, children, areas of expertise, and distinctive qualities about themselves. However, many residents disliked the survey; it took too much work to complete. They preferred the casual way of matching used the year before. In the future, we will simplify the survey by asking fewer questions: name, birthday, jobs, and hobbies. But the questionnaires did help us match students with residents. We circulated the forms around class, and students chose a person that looked interesting on paper. Along with the questionnaires, residents from the Masonic Home signed a release form giving permission for the student's biographical report to be published at the college or in the community.

Because we were unable to find enough residents to place one with each of our students, we had to go beyond the Masonic Home. Three students

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interviewed residents at a smaller nursing home in town, the Wilcox Medical Center. Three other students interviewed retired faculty members from the college.

Once students had the name of an elder, they were responsible for calling that person and making an appointment to meet for the interview. Prior to the interviews, we helped prepare students by reviewing the assignment with them:

Write a report about the person you interview: focus on what you learn about this person. Include the conversation between you and your source, but also consider including other information such as first impressions, a physical description of where you met, perhaps a description of the source's appearance. Use enough detail to make the reader see the interview situation and setting just as you did.

We also gave students some suggestions for the interview: 1) ask open-ended questions; 2) if the elder is on a roll, don't interrupt to ask questions unless she or he is getting off the track; 3) when taking notes, don't try to write everything—listen for the most important ideas and details; 4) write a rough draft soon after the interview so you won't forget many details.

In addition, we explored with our students the the problem of what they should talk about with elders. We discussed various options. Students could ask residents about 1) their advice for college people today to help them live meaningful and productive lives; 2) their careers—jobs they occupied, problems and surprises they encountered from their work; 3) their lives and lifestyles when they were 18-20 years old; 4) major problems in their lives and how they solved them or came to terms with them; 5) special knowledge they possess and would like to share; 6) unusual experiences that changed their lives; 7) changes they would make if they could live their lives over; 8) memorable incidents—rewarding, discouraging, amusing, etc.; 9) attributes which served them best—persistence, patience, curiosity, and so forth; 10) the importance of preparation in the form of education. Free to use any or none of these suggestions, students prepared a list of questions based mostly on their elder's occupation, which was the factor that often intrigued them most about the person.

In class each day we discussed problems and pleasures students were having with the activity. Some students had trouble contacting their elders

by phone. Many were confused about what focus their papers could take. Chet, who is studying to be a doctor and is already a nurse, interviewed Nellie, a retired nurse. This gave him a focus. Students had to decide what information they should use. Otis described how his elder took him for a tour of the Home and showed him a wing where helpless old people live, "the kind who sometimes don't know you're there." This bothered Otis, making him realize that was not the way he wanted to grow old. He did not know whether he should include this information in his report; he decided not to. Brian, who interviewed James Comp (who had wanted the pretty girl the previous year), said he gained a good friend and made plans to visit him regularly. Most students contributed to the class discussions, and many seemed to draw support from the others.

We emphasized that, as with many forms of discourse, there is not one correct way to write this report. Students would need to find their own best ways. They would choose their own focus, organization, and style. The activity, therefore, did not lend itself to a five-paragraph essay formula. Students had to shape their own content, based on the information gathered from strangers with a wealth of experience and knowledge. Thus, the project enabled students to engage in a unique rhetorical situation.

After the students interviewed their elders, most found that one meeting was not enough. Writing a first draft made them realize that they needed to ask more questions, get more information, check facts. They met with their elders once again. This process of repeated dialogue therefore echoed the process of scholarly research: collecting plenty of information and checking for accuracy.

When students had completed second drafts, they met in groups to critique each other's papers. Through reading they got to know some of the other students' elders, which was fun and created discussion about the residents: some were very talkative; others were harder to interview. Some peers suggested getting more information or using additional direct quotes. Others wanted to know what the elders looked like. The dialogue in the peer groups as students compared elders seemed to encourage more detailed writing. After class we worked closely with students, helping them with any composing or editing problems they were encountering.

One of the features of this project that made it distinctive compared to most traditional writing assignments was that we required students to

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give copies of their papers to their elders at a reception. Knowing this, students felt more compelled than usual to edit and polish their writing. They had a real audience: strangers they had come to know.

When Bill started this project last year, he held a reception at the college for the Masonic Home residents. Students helped plan the event. At the urging of his classmates, Ben agreed to perform a short magic show. During the reception, an administrator from the college and the home welcomed everyone and praised the project for bridging generations. Public relations people took photographs. After Ben performed his magic act, one of the elders, Lydia Bouschor, volunteered to perform. She entertained everyone with a long humorous poem based on puns that she had found in a newspaper forty years earlier. She recited it from memory. This year the elders held a reception for our students in a ballroom at the Masonic Home. Again students volunteered to entertain: two students memorized and performed Abbott and Costello's "Who's on First?" routine; another student played two classical songs on the piano. Bill read several of his own poems. Representing the elders, Lydia played a few songs on her accordion. As with the first reception, students and elders laughed together. We had a good time.

What impressed us most at the reception, however, was the warm interaction we witnessed between students and their elders. After the entertainment and punch and cheesecake, students gave their reports to their partners. Elders read and discussed the papers with their students sitting beside them. One elder invited her student to her room to compare her report with a report that had been done earlier for the *Masonic State Newsletter*.

On the day after the reception, we asked students to evaluate our class project. Students wrote responses anonymously. Most students enjoyed it very much. One wrote, "I think this is a great experience—it gives practice in doing research and also teaches about life in general," while another reported that "it made me overcome my fears of elderly strangers." A third student spoke for several others when she wrote, "I think it was a wonderful experience if for only one reason, I gained a new friend in the world."

Many students, however, felt restrained by the interview format; they wanted more time to spend with their elders in mutual dialogue. As one student put it, "I wish we would have talked more rather than interviewed."

I think we both would have gotten more out of the experience and been able to connect better if she could have gotten to know me at the same time." Another student suggested that next year we could give students the names of elders earlier so they could visit with them throughout the term.

In their evaluations many students said they enjoyed the project because it exposed them to a different kind of research writing. This point was made by the student who noted that "the paper gave the student a chance to use external resources. It was a research paper without library research." Another student wrote, "It's a new way of doing research and it also builds the technique of relating to other people." A third student expressed how easy oral research is compared to library research: "It was probably my favorite paper to write because I had all of the information. I only had to piece together how to do it. Plus, it was easier to check the information; I only had to ask rather than try to look it up in books."

A surprising benefit of this project was that all of the students' biographical reports of Masonic Home residents were published in our local newspaper. During the project we had told students that their reports might be published—because two students' reports were published last year. We wanted students to consider the community as a possible audience for their papers. But we did not expect that so many of this year's papers would be published. What happened was fortunate timing.

At the end of spring term, reports in hand, we met with the managing editor of *The Morning Sun*, Mary Catherine Buday, to see if she would be interested in publishing some of our students' interviews. She told us that the *Sun* was doing a special week-long feature on the Michigan Home's centennial. A month later a special issue of *The Morning Sun* came out containing eleven student reports; the other reports were published each day that week. We bought extra copies of the newspapers and mailed them to our students along with notes of congratulations. Chet, one of Carol's students, wrote her a letter: "Thank you for taking the time to send me a copy of the newspaper. My parents were very happy to see something that I had written in print. My father was so pleased he wrote the newspaper and got more copies."

We recommend that more English teachers experiment with projects like this one involving elders who live in nursing homes. Students enjoy researching older people's lives; the experience helps them value the elderly.

Elders enjoy interacting with freshmen; they see that students and the college value them. The reports students write for this project seem more important to them than many of their other papers. Also, the project involves all four language arts in significant ways: students call the elder to set up appointments; they engage in firsthand research and oral history with a stranger full of experience and knowledge and willing to share it—a person with a different point of view; they experience the composing process in a unique way by actually writing for the elder and the community; they pay careful attention to observing concrete, specific details, to gathering, analyzing, and synthesizing information; they participate in planning a reception that celebrates the bridging of generation. They also see how their own writing can be a gift for others to read.

Beyond the pedagogic value, the project has a humanistic value. Ben Barber, the student who performed his magic at the first reception, concluded his report on eighty-nine year old Nancy Montgomery:

Speaking with someone like Nancy is something every young person should have the opportunity to do. Nancy explained how our past experiences serve as building blocks to our understanding of the future. She summed up the significance of our visit with the following quote: "We build the ladders by which we rise from the lowly earth to the vaulted skies. And we mount to its summit rung by rung." In meeting Nancy Montgomery, I have moved one more rung up that ladder.

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