

***SUCCESSFUL
USES OF
E-MAIL***

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**Electronic Mail in the English Class: A Bridge to the Generation Gap
and a Stimulus for the Development of Literacy**

Marion Fey & Maureen Widrick

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hen some students enter school halls in September, they often feel that they are entering an alien environment that has little connection with the world outside. The environment of the English class unwittingly can reinforce this feeling, particularly when students write essays for their teacher as the primary audience. Though the teacher is the dispenser of grades, she or he often is seen only as an intermediary who responds with comments for “improvement” but in reality may have little investment in what the student has to say. When this scenario is repeated year after year, by the time students arrive at college, their essays, devoid of voice, lead faculty to ponder the lack of critical and creative thinking in even the most well-structured writing. A solution to this problem, however, may be found through new uses of computer technology in the writing classroom.

Schools investing in computer technology that links students to the world beyond the classroom offer a real boon to teachers concerned with literacy development. Now teachers are able more easily to structure community-based curriculum that extends the borders of classrooms and that, according to Gere et al. (1992), contributes to a more meaningful approach for learning to write. Maureen Widrick’s eighth grade classroom in upstate New York’s Byron Bergen Middle School has profited from such technology. Part of a pilot program entitled Project SUCCESS (Seniors Using Computers to Communicate and Educate Special Students), this eighth grade class room was given one computer and modem for students to correspond with senior citizens through electronic mail (E-mail).

Project SUCCESS began as a pilot program in 1990 through the support of the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) of Rochester, Rochester Telephone Corporation, and Prodigy Services, Inc. Rochester Telephone Corporation and Prodigy Services, Inc., donated equipment, services, and software to Garson Meyer Senior Center, Rochester Presbyterian Home, the Jewish Community Center, and Byron Bergen Middle School, as well as two other schools. With the goal of demonstrating the social and educational benefits of computer networking technology, the project provided opportunities for students and senior citizens to interact through intergenerational, multi-cultural experiences designed to foster better understanding between the two age groups. Among the objectives for students were to provide practical, non-traditional opportunities for

reading and writing, to improve written communication skills and self expression, and to improve self-esteem so important to all aspects of a student's education, particularly in the literacy classroom.

To understand the actual benefits of Project SUCCESS for Byron Bergen's eighth graders, the following research explores the effects of expanding the borders of Maureen Widrick's 1993-94 English classes. Available for investigation were selected writings of participating students and seniors during the past three years, videotapes of face-to-face meetings of seniors and students, data derived from personal interviews with 1993-94 participants--both students and selected senior citizens from the Rochester Presbyterian Home—and our own reflections on students' literacy development from the perspectives of the classroom teacher and a professor of English education who frequently visited this classroom.

THE CONTEXT FOR THE PROJECT

Located between Rochester and Buffalo, Byron Bergen is primarily a bedroom community, although it boasts of several large agricultural-related businesses. Geographically, it is one of the largest rural school districts in the state, and therefore its 1300 students (kindergarten through twelfth grade) are bussed to the central school.

With the elementary program following a whole language approach, the middle school language arts classes combine those practices with a Nancy Atwell writing workshop style, incorporated with shared literature experiences. Consequently, students who participated in Project SUCCESS were able to use the computer to respond to their pen pals, or grandfriends, more easily than in a traditional setting, since they could use the computer to send mail to their friend during class time. Because eighth graders had no study halls on their eight-period schedules, the availability of computer equipment during English class was essential to Project SUCCESS.

In September, all of the English students viewed a video tape about the project. Those interested in the program were asked to submit a one-page biographical introduction to be used as their initial message. On a first-come, first-serve basis, students were assigned their grandfriends, though a few students were personally asked to participate when, for example, counselors identified possible candidates based on weak writing skills or the need for a positive support system. When up to three students per English class submitted their introductions, a conversation with the coordinator of the senior center occurred. At that time, the coordinator, along with the classroom teacher, matched the students with senior citizens.

As in past years, the students and grandfriends established their patterns for correspondence; for most, twice weekly was typical. With no restrictions on their communications, students discussed their school activities, special events, and personal lives. Students asked for advice, voiced opinions, and shared secrets. Relationships developed that would exceed the school year, with contacts maintained through US mail, telephone, and/or occasional visits to the senior center.

Students responded positively to the direct communication with grandfriends. They could not wait to receive mail and were quick to respond. Even their history lessons became more real than fiction as they spoke to people who had actually lived through the depression and World War II. The students accepted the strengths and weaknesses of their pen pals and learned to share ideas despite age differences. Practicing skills necessary for effective communication, they began to recognize the need to improve and expand their writing. Students also became computer literate through the program.

Project SUCCESS was not without difficulties. Most obviously, the limitation of only one computer per classroom and senior center constrained on-line time. In addition, limited computer identification memberships created confusion. Although an occasional glitch in the phone service occurred, Rochester Telephone was quick to correct the problem. In addition, time constraints of the class schedule created conflicts if any one pen pal took an extended time to write; in the rural setting and with a mandated course load, students had no alternate time for writing. Despite these difficulties, Project SUCCESS created strong personal ties between two widely separated generations.

**STUDENTS
SPEAK OUT**

When students were asked what they least liked about Project SUCCESS, most students responded with “my pen pal wrote only once a week” and “there wasn’t enough time in the school day to write to our pen pals.” These comments reflect the positive attitude students had toward electronic connections with their senior citizen grandfriends. Writing E-mail messages seemed different from school writing. Instead of writing “to improve” skills, students wrote to share ideas with special people. As such, they moved into a new dimension of literacy that seemed more authentic. In the process, these students may well have become more aware of what is required in effective writing. An analysis of the interactions of three pen-pal relationships—each quite different—mirrors the value of the project to students’ literacy development.

*Enrichment for
Kevin*

Kevin, age 13, volunteered to write to Milton because he wanted to know someone from a “different center”. Clearly, Milton’s experience

offered a contrast to that of Kevin. Born in 1899 in Rockville, Connecticut, Milton graduated from college in 1930 and theological seminary in 1932. With almost a century of life experience, including being a charter member of the American Legion, a member of the Grange, weekly visitor to convalescent homes, and Congregational minister, Milton introduced Kevin to a piece of American culture that otherwise would have remained unknown to Kevin. Milton himself joined Project SUCCESS to learn about computers and to keep in touch with youth.

In school, Kevin was probably the most well-read student in his class and also a good writer. An ambitious young man, Kevin looked for challenging books to read when he completed his required work—usually ahead of other students. For Kevin, Project SUCCESS served as an enrichment to the English curriculum that peaked his interest in the world beyond school and expanded his knowledge. Kevin explained that Milton “had lived all over”, and he talked about some of those places with Kevin. Kevin learned from Milton that even at 94, seniors can be active and inquiring. Milton told of going to the theater, practicing “tone chimes”, and attending travel log films on Hong Kong and Burma. He also related the details of his first trip to Florida in 1934. His family traveled from Connecticut in a 1927 Nash and spent \$50 for the entire trip—a lesson in inflation for Kevin. Upon arriving, Milton ate a dozen oranges which he picked from real trees—an indulgence he regretted later in the day. Kevin also learned about the famous Bok Tower, a tribute to the ornithologist Edward Bok, and that Milton’s friend had helped to build this structure. Other letters told of Milton’s son who worked as a marine geologist and of Milton’s own recent achievement in having been recognized as Pastor Emeritus 50 years after beginning his ministry.

Milton’s character intrigued Kevin, particularly his dedication to the task at hand. For example, Milton never missed the appointed day that he agreed to write to Kevin. From this special pen pal, Kevin related that he learned an important lesson: “If you want to get something done, do it now.” He also provided friendship for Kevin at a time when Kevin felt awkward among his own age group. Though Milton’s life differed from Kevin’s in distinct ways, the two shared an on-going interest in sports. Milton wrote about the Knicks and Pacers, the Cowboys and Giants, the Bills, and the Raiders. Kevin not only watched sports but participated actively in swimming. He proudly wrote to Milton about his fastest 50-yard free-style event in a recent meet.

For Kevin, writing “an idea” to a real adult audience was easier than writing to “just the teacher”. Teachers “just read it” whereas a pen pal is “really interested”. At least Milton’s messages made Kevin feel that way. Kevin thought his pen pal provided a good model for writing, particularly in fleshing an idea out with detail. Now Kevin plans to work hard to

*Awareness of
Writing
Conventions for
Sarah*

emulate that style. Kevin was pleased that Project SUCCESS enabled him to learn new points of view from people and a new form of communication through computers—both enriching Kevin’s developing literacy.

For Sarah, age 14, pen pals with grandfriends provided “someone to write to”. Living with her dad and sister, Sarah appreciated the companionship of Elizabeth, age 85. Sarah wrote approximately 100 messages—more than any other student—and Elizabeth responded to most of them. The computer exchange added excitement at the beginning of Sarah’s day, as each day Sarah hurried directly from the bus to her English class to check the screen for mail. Sarah appreciated learning about Elizabeth’s current interests in crafts. Elizabeth reported having made nineteen quilts as well as numerous baby quilts, wall hangings, and samples of weaving.

With writing almost daily to Elizabeth, Sarah, perhaps for the first time, became aware of the meaning of sentence structure conventions. When it came to writing, Sarah needed more direct attention than other students in her class. Easily frustrated, she wanted to do well despite her limited experience and understanding of the writing process. Her excellent attitude to school, however, contributed to her active participation with her pen pal, which benefited her in many ways.

Sarah herself noted that Elizabeth “used words differently.” In time, Sarah became more aware of the demands of writing and more comfortable with this medium of expression. In an early message (all letters are printed as students originally wrote them), she wrote:

Dear Elizabeth,

Hello how are you I’m fine what have you been up to. Do you like to be called betty or Elizabeth? Well have to go because were starting class.

Your friend,

Sarah

Sarah’s writing reflects her problems with sentence punctuation that continued to plague her throughout the year. For all students, keying communications into the computer increased this challenge. Though still devoid of conventional sentence punctuation, a letter three months later was more developed:

Dear Betty,

Hi how are you I'm fine. I'm getting sick of the letter's not getting through too. I'm writing a script for English it's about teen violence in the U.S. it's coming along pretty well. I haven't really been watching much of the Olympics cause I've been really busy working with horses with my friend Nicki. I'm also quite sick of this weather were having. I have to go I'm missing a French test

love Ya. . .Sarah

Though Sarah at times seemed frustrated with the computer, she was disappointed when Elizabeth's messages occasionally failed to get through. According to Sarah, interacting through E-mail added "fun" to English and also helped with "spelling." In Sarah's case, extending the boundaries of the classroom introduced this young girl to an authentic literacy experience that allowed her to begin to make sense of the conventions of writing. Perhaps in English class next year, she will be ready to master those forms.

*Maintaining Voice for
Jamie*

Fourteen-year-old female student Jamie found some commonalties with her pen pal, Helen, age 96, for Jamie was a talented dancer and Helen a loyal aerobic fan. The computer provided Jamie with a tool that her parents would have been unable to provide at home. And with that tool came the possibility of developing a very special relationship with a sympathetic person. Jamie volunteered for the project because she liked people and enjoyed "putting up a good argument" when the occasion presented itself. Jamie found Helen "down to earth", certainly not "a-lady-in-a-white-dress-porch woman", as she envisioned most women of Helen's era. She learned that as a young girl Helen had worked hard on a farm, caring for her father when her sickly mother was unable to. Jamie was amazed that Helen's daily chores included using a wash board. And she was also impressed by Helen's courage when, at age twelve, she rescued her father from a tractor accident.

Helen listened attentively to Jamie’s consuming moods. Jamie wrote:

Dear Helen,

. . . So, how are things with you? Today is just one of those days, the days you don’t feel like being alive. Oh, well, I’ll get over it. What kinds of things do you do to keep yourself busy? I’d like to know more about what it’s like to be. . .Well, basically...YOU!!!! I already know what it’s like to be, Boring Old Me. . . .I just want to know more about you!!

Well, I’d better get going. I hope to hear a response from you sooooooon!!

Yours truly,

Jamie

Not long afterwards, Jamie was in a better mood with exciting news for Helen:

Dear Helen,

Hey! How’s it going? Not too bad here. Well, Valentines Day is fast approaching. I spent around \$10.00 on my boyfriend. His name is Mike. We’ve been going together for 3 months and 4 days. He is very special to me. I know many adults may say, that us kids DON’T know what love is, but I feel this is different. Do you get where I’m coming from?

. . . I can’t wait till Valentines Day. I hope yours is splendid.

I hope to hear from you soon! Enjoy yourself! !!! Oh, and HAPPY VALENTINES DAY !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Your pen pal,
Jamie

Two weeks later Jamie’s mood catapulted as she shared an emotional upheaval so typical of an eighth grade girl:

Dear Helen,

. . .I've been rather depressed, lately. Last Thursday, my boyfriend broke up with me. He said it was because he couldn't trust me. Then the next day, in first period math, (this was the day after we broke up), I turned around to talk to him, (he thought I was mad at him), he looked at me strange. I guess he didn't expect me to talk to him. I wasn't mad, just sad. He "dumped" me at 3 months and 3 weeks. Yesterday Mike got a new girlfriend. I guess I don't mind, too much. I've heard that a few people like me, so I should be alright, I hope. So, how are things with you? Other than what I've told you, I guess I'm O.K. Hope to here from you soon! ! !

Yours truly,
Jamie

The emotional upheavals of eighth graders are real. For Jamie, being able to share with Helen helped to stay in touch with her own feelings as she voiced these various daily events. A subsequent message revealed Jamie as a spirited teen who usually held on to her own beliefs. Jamie wrote:

Dear Helen,

Bonjour!!! How are you? I'm fine, I guess. Last night was my chorus concert. I think I did rather well, I was surprised my voice didn't crack. My mom was there, and a couple of friends too. I was very nervous, at first. I had that speaking part (as I might have told you). Mind you, I did quite well.

Who are your good friends? I have a lot of friends, most are pretty faithful too. The only problem with some of them is (not that I don't like them, I do) They are always starting all these petty fights. Most of the time, I just let everything go. I try not to let things get to me, but it doesn't always work. The bad thing about me is I have a VERY BAD temper. At times, I try to control it, but the anger gets the best of me. But. . .most of the time, I am a pretty controlled person.

So, what's been going on with you? From what I've told you, not too much here. The only things left is tomorrow is Sports n' Shorts Day. That'll be fun! May 31st, I get to meet you! June 1st, I have a French speaking Final.....

Well, I'd better get going. Can't wait to meet you!

Love always,
Jamie

The same day Helen responded:

Dear Jamie,

I am anxious to meet you also. Won't that be something? I never thought that would happen.

It was so nice when I went down to breakfast, that I said to myself, that I must hurry through breakfast and go out. Then when I finished eating, someone and I went to the craft room and that was the last I thought of going out!

Your friend,
Helen

Exchanges like these reflect the reciprocal benefits of the pen-pal exchange. Despite computer problems that limited Helen's messages, both Helen and Jamie looked forward to connecting through E-mail and also finally face-to-face. By voicing her concerns about boy friends and girl friends, Jamie demonstrated that she was working out her beliefs and holding on to her feelings during this difficult transition into adolescence. For Jamie, who acknowledged she "didn't write much" in school, Project SUCCESS motivated her to write "more and better". It not only made her more concerned about proper grammar, but it required her to record her ideas for a real audience, to write with energy and conviction, knowing that a specific audience would be receiving the communication. To this audience she could share daily dilemmas as well as reach beyond herself to cheer another person through the day.

CONCLUSION

Project SUCCESS offered a unique experience for Kevin, Sarah, and Jamie as well as for other participants. All of the students who volunteered welcomed the opportunity to extend the boundaries of their literacy education in order to get away from the "routine" of traditional school lessons and to know someone older and "different." Over and over students explained that their initial attitude toward seniors changed from people who "do nothing" and just "plop down" to active, involved persons with special interests--even the computer! Several found their partners sensitive to teens' problems, whether difficulties of living in a single family or of being unjustly grounded at home. Students also appreciated being taken seriously by their grandfriend mentors. One student commented that for her the project served to refute the stereotype that "teens don't talk to older people". Another was surprised that older people could be so open in computer communication, even more open than her own grandmother in face-to-face meetings. Just as for Kevin, many of the students found their lives enriched by this experience and came away with

more knowledge of the world around them and confidence to interact with this expanded community.

The writing required to extend the borders of their classrooms left these eighth graders with a positive attitude toward writing. Students unanimously appreciated the freedom “with no teacher over their shoulder” to construct these messages so that writing became “more fun”. This freedom led students to feel comfortable about writing about their own personal experience, and they were pleased with the interest shown by caring seniors like Ruth, who praised her pen pal for generous New Year’s resolutions, sympathized with her when friends made hurtful remarks, and encouraged her to be loving to her parents despite their separation. All students agreed that these written exchanges with grandfriends made them more aware of the process of writing and of different forms of expression. In particular, they noticed the need to develop their writing with more detail than before. They also began to appreciate the emphasis on format and mechanics that were a part of their school curriculum.

Though the learnings derived from enriched knowledge and greater awareness of the writing process are important to literacy development, perhaps the presence of voice that derived from increased confidence in communicating with others may have the most significant influence on these students’ literacy development, particularly for the young women. In their research on adolescent girls in the schools, Brown and Gilligan (1992) noted the phenomenon of the loss of voice among young adolescent girls as they struggle to understand the conflicting messages of the adult world and to follow the cultural admonition to act as “good girls”. In learning control, girls of this age begin to hide their feelings, to push down responses that have been so natural and open as younger girls. As this silence continues, girls begin to speak not in their own voices but in the voices of others.

If these recent insights into the development of adolescent girls are correct, perhaps computer networking exchanges, particularly exchanges with senior grandfriends, can play a role in retaining directness of voice as students, especially girls, cross over into adolescence. Indeed, current research suggests that interactions through computer networking encourage open communication and reflection (Selfe, 1990; Fey, 1994). For young students to have the opportunity to express their own ideas openly to sympathetic mentors who themselves have experienced the conflicting feelings of life’s stages is indeed a beneficent and strong statement in favor of computer networking in the schools. Using computers to extend the borders of classrooms with connections such as those in Project SUCCESS can offer enrichment, writing skill, and the development of voice essential for the full range of literate behavior required of women and men in an increasingly complex society.

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