Talking, Oklahoman to Oklahoman

by Barbara Howry

Editors' note: Barbara Howry and Judy Jenlink are two Oklahoma Writing Project teachers who in 1999—thanks to a National Writing Project migrant—got their students talking and writing to one another. This idea turned out to be a little less straightforward than it sounds. Howry and Jenlink teach in two different Oklahomas. Howry works at Putnam City West High School in the environs of Oklahoma City. Jenlink teaches in Timberlake, a rural community, a two-hour drive from the urban center of Oklahoma City. Timberlake has a total of 125 students; Putnam City West has 1,600 students.

I first have to give you some background as to how this connection happened. I had not originally planned a connection within my state until I went to Georgia where I attended the first summer institute of the National Endowment for Humanities-funded Keeping and Creating American Communities (KCAC) at the Kennesaw Mountain Writing Project. Here, Peggy Corbett, a Georgia teacher, talked about connecting high school classrooms in Oklahoma and Georgia. The exchange between my class and the Georgia students did take place, to the benefit of both groups, and in the process of this exchange, I came to a new understanding: My Oklahoma students really don't know much about other Oklahoma students.

My realization came about when my students expressed frustration with the Georgia teens' stereotypes of Oklahomans. The Georgians' statements came out of their belief that most Oklahomans live in very small towns in rural areas. What my students didn't realize was that many of the stereotypes contained a ring of truth; for rural Oklahomans, the generalizations were real enough. The problem was that my city-slicker students honestly had no idea about what life really was like for teens living in these small towns.

I decided to broaden their outlook, and that's where Judy Jenlink, another Oklahoma Writing Project teacher-consultant, came in. Judy teaches in Timberlake, Oklahoma, which is, in truth, a rural area. In telling her of my class's experience with the Georgia class, we came up with the idea to connect my class with hers.

As we talked, the differences we saw between our schools made the idea intriguing. At Timberlake, for instance, Judy's students come from four small communities. Putnam City West High School, where I teach, is one of three high schools in a single community. Some of Judy's students drive 15 to 20 miles to school; none of my students live more than a few miles away. My classes are sometimes as large as 32 students; Judy's are much smaller. Finally, Putnam City West is also much more racially diverse than the Timberlake School.

The communication between our two classes began via Blackboard.com. Blackboard is a website on which a teacher can enroll a class or classes and which gives the students an opportunity to post writings and communications online. The site also includes many extra options, including a chance for students to have their own website where they can post pictures and additional information about themselves. Our first writing was to be a general introduction that would allow the students from both schools to supply information about themselves and their activities and hobbies. After the introductions, both classes wrote poems, using George Ella Lyon's poem "Where I'm From" as a model, and we posted these on the site. Many additional postings, on and off Blackboard, happened as students responded to each other's writings.

It would not be correct to say that my students held the view that all teenagers in Oklahoma were just like them. They knew there was an exotic world out there beyond their immediate reach. A few of my girls, for example, decided before we began this connection that they wanted to find a "cowboy." They went after this assignment with humor and excitement. Demonstrating that kids will be kids no matter where they live, the guys in my class were just a bit put out with the girls' interest in this alien type. They made fun of the girls and played down anything that had to do with the Timberlake guys.

Undaunted, the girls jumped on any posting in which the guy gave the slightest hint that he might be a cowboy. When one of the Timberlake guys signed his entries with the name "Rope," my girls were ecstatic. They just knew only a cowboy would have the name Rope. I found out through Judy that although Rope wanted to be a rodeo cowboy in the worst way, he hadn't quite made it yet. And then there was Kaleb's introduction, in which he said he lived on a farm that had been in his family for 100 years. But later Kaleb wrote to clarify:

I think you guys have got the wrong impression. We're not really all cowboys.

We're just normal kids who were raised on a farm instead of in a city. We wear Abercrombie and Fitch, and American Eagle all the same. The only way I resemble a cowboy is that I am an Oklahoma State University Cowboys fan.

One of the Timberlake girls made sure that my girls got the message by telling them that the guys at her school were not cowboys; they were farm boys. Of course, my girls did not understand—or did not want to understand—the difference.

Then the Timberlake students came to visit, and my kids realized that they had made the same stereotype assumptions about the rural students that the Georgia kids had made about them. Their reflective writings after the visit from Timberlake revealed many new observations.

Jody wrote, "I don't think I saw anyone wearing Wranglers or cowboy boots."

"I thought that these people were going to be hicks," Nathan said. "But once I saw them, they looked just like me."

During the visit, students from both schools got caught out in the halls during a passing period in which some of the students were going to class and some were going to lunch. Timberlake students couldn't believe how crowded our halls were, and some of them told my students that they thought our students were rude for bumping into people, however accidentally, and not apologizing.

For complicated reasons, my students were unable to visit Timberlake, but their sense of the Timberlake students after the visit did change. When the rural students did not arrive "on cows and hay bail carts" as Ben put it, my students came to think and write more about what it is like for all of them to be Oklahomans, keeping in mind both the differences and the similarities.

As Megan reflected, there are, in fact, differences between our communities and these affect people profoundly: "I think that who you are has a lot to do with where you live and which part of the state you live in. I never realized that until now."

But students learned, as well, that an understanding of these differences can lead to mutual respect and can puncture stereotypes:
“There was a lot of stereotyping going on,” Traci wrote. “The Georgia kids thought that we lived in tepees and had outhouses. On the other hand, I thought wrong of the Oklahomans. I was thinking major hicks and people with no style. I was wrong. I learned a lot from this project—not to be so judgmental and not to jump to conclusions.”

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