A twinge of worry crept over me as I neared my classroom door. A parent phone call had kept me occupied, and I was five minutes late for my own class. “I wonder if I still have desk,” I worried. This new Individualized Writing class was tricky. It consisted of a combination of former Honors English students mixed with uninterested car mechanics, cheerleaders, and a smattering of diligent Koreans and Filipinos just out of ESL and ready to try a “real” English class.

As I pushed the door open, I was amazed to find that not only was my desk still there, but all thirty of them were at their desks as well. No glance or giggle acknowledged my entrance. Each head was bowed over a copy of what looked like our bright blue Class Directory which had been stacked in fifteen piles on the window sill to be collated and stapled together. “Is this the same group that couldn’t figure out how to number off from one to five yesterday?” I thought.

I began feebly with “Well, I see you’ve gathered together your copies of the Class Directory. Do you have any nominations for best article?” But no one looked up. A few even waved the sound of my interrupting voice away as one would an annoying mosquito. They read on the rest of the hour, deeply engrossed in each other’s writing. This incident took place eight years ago, and I have been publishing a Class Directory at the beginning of each composition class ever since.

But what is a Class Directory? It’s a collection of articles written by and about each member of the class. I explain it as the kind of write-up one would see in the local paper when a visiting celebrity comes to town. This assignment requires about three weeks to complete from pre-write to publishing, and I use it to teach every phase of the writing process. Publishing a Class Directory also promotes a friendly and trusting atmosphere; a must in a class where students are asked to take risks with their writing and use response/editing groups. But the thing I like best about this assignment is that it is not written for or to me as the teacher. Once it really sinks in that we’re going to publish this piece of writing in book form with a copy for every member of the class, the teacher as the examiner takes a backseat to the more important audience of peers.

Brainstorming Interview Questions

I begin a Class Directory by helping the class brainstorm to discover questions they can ask a new acquaintance; questions about place of birth, family, school activities, and jobs or future goals. Then I ask students to add to this list and finally choose five questions they feel comfortable asking.

It would be quite simple at this point to just assign partners and have them interview each other, but this would not achieve the objectives of a Class Directory. My goal is to get every student in the room to carry on a short conversation with every other student.

Gathering The Information

Before the interviews begin, I hand out the Class Directory Data Sheet (see figure 1) and assign each student a number. Students then write their names on the line in the square next to their number. Next I ask them to refer to their list of interview questions and choose one to ask. At this point I usually demonstrate how to do a two minute interview with a student. I begin:

“What’s your number?”

“Seven.”

“OK, What’s your name?”

“Cheryl Lovegreen.” (I write Cheryl’s name on the line in box 7.)

“Cheryl, how long have you lived in Alaska?”

“I’ve been here four years now; I came in the eighth grade.”

“Where did you live before and what was your reason for moving to Alaska?”

“We lived in Shreveport, Louisiana, where my dad was stationed in the Air Force, then he was transferred to Elmendorf Air Force Base.”

“Thanks, Cheryl.”

Then I write in the square, “Cheryl Lovegreen came to Alaska four years ago from Shreveport,
Louisiana, because her father was assigned to Elmendorf Air Force Base here in Anchorage.”

Next Cheryl chooses one of her interview questions and interviews me. The class as a whole will help her compose her one sentence piece of information to be written in my square on her data sheet.

I take a number, participate in the interviews, and write an article. It’s important for kids to see teachers writing (and struggling with writing), and it’s fun to have an article about me included in the book.

A few important points should be brought up before students begin the interview process. The first is “Don’t tell anyone anything you don’t want to see in print.” The student is the only source of information and so therefore has control over what is printed. This is a positive assignment with a getting-to-know-you theme. We’re not writing for The National Enquirer or Midnight. Also, some perfectly innocent questions may make some students uncomfortable. If this happens, the student has the right to ask for another from the interviewer’s list. Also I advise the students not to answer the same question more than once. (i.e., Cheryl won’t answer any more questions about why she came to Alaska.) But since we’re collecting one bit of information about each person in the class, I can ask the same question a number of times. I, for example, may continue on with my Alaska question unless someone says, “I’ve already answered that” in which case, I ask another question from my list.

I don’t advise doing data collection for a whole period. I reserve it for the last ten or fifteen minutes of a period over a week’s time. I also give a quota of completed interviews for each day and encourage phone interviews. What better homework assignment for a teenager than “Go home and talk on the phone!”

When most squares have been filled in, I ask the students to complete their own numbered square with some little known but wonderful fact about themselves. This is a good opportunity to mention an award or honor which didn’t come up in the interview process. If a student can’t think of anything to write, I advise, “Go ask your mother, mothers always remember all the wonderful things you’ve done!” Some students prefer to write this one in third person so it won’t seem as if they’re bragging.

Next I collect all the data sheets and cut out the squares. Some teachers have their students do this, but I can do an entire class period of thirty-five sheets in half an hour by stacking the sheets and using a paper cutter. After they’re all cut, I put all the ones in an envelope marked 1, all the twos in an envelope marked 2. So what I have is thirty pieces of information about one student in each envelope.

Assign Partners

I pass out the envelopes. I may do a little fast shuffling and assign two chronic absentees to each other. I have, on occasion, selected a potential malcontent as my partner. (After we talk at length, get to know each other, and I write a glowing article extolling the accomplishments of my interview subject, he or she sometimes becomes surprisingly cooperative.)

Writing and Revising—Teaching Writing While Students Write

Taking thirty pieces of unrelated information and fashioning them into a cohesive and informative article is not an easy task. Here is a practical and realistic opportunity to teach paragraph development, interest grabbing leads, and transitions while students are writing.

First I ask students to read carefully each slip of paper in the envelope and discard any duplicate pieces. Next they group like pieces of information together and paper clip them. There might be three or four pieces on sports or school activities, etc. Some students are amazed to discover what they have in each pile is the makings of a paragraph. This physical manipulation of pieces of paper brings the concept of paragraphing into focus well, and rarely do I need to talk about paragraph organization the rest of the semester.

For homework, students begin their rough drafts by getting all the information from the slips of paper onto one sheet. It’s important to double space and note if they are unclear about the information or if they need more details.

The next few days are spent drafting and revising. The impetus of publishing seems to add intensity to the revision process. When students are finished with the first draft right from the data slips, I put them in groups. Group members listen to each writer read the draft. The writer then asks, “What else would you like to know about his person?”

By this time the writer is anxious to talk to the subject of the interview, so I give the students time to get together and add those much needed interesting details to their rough drafts.

While the students are revising, we spend some time on interesting openings. “How about ‘Jane was born in Cleveland, Ohio’ for a lead?” I’ll ask.” “Blah beginning!” someone will reply. I then read some leads from magazine articles or from collections of Class Directories from years past. Could it begin with a startling fact? A physical description? How
about a question to engage the reader? We brainstorm possible openings and no one opens with “Jane was born.”

Another day we might talk about how one cements all these scraps of disjointed information together into a smooth, finished product. A list of transitional devices helps here. Sometimes I use the overhead projector to look at two paragraphs which need a transition, and the class comes up with a variety of ways to join them.

At this point I require a second readable draft. Students group in fours and each member receives a duplicate of the other three members’ articles. The writer reads the article out loud while the members of the group make notes on their copies. First they’re to look at content; paragraphing, leads, transitions, clarity. Secondly, they proofread for spelling and mechanics.

Now the final piece can be written. As teacher, I don’t see it until it has been approved and initialed by the subject of the interview. If the subject disapproves the final article for any reason, the writer has more time to finish.

When my time comes, this is one set of papers I’m eager to read. Clearly, the papers are easy to read because they are almost error free after going through the editing groups. If there are any corrections to be made, I make them in shocking pink, so the typists will see them.

Publishing

The final step is typing and publishing. With younger students, I find parents willing to do the typing. I give volunteers only four or five articles to type and I send home a sheet of specific directions which includes a typed sample. Many of my juniors and seniors are in typing classes, and they can type their own, and occasionally a typing class will take us on as a special project.

While the typing is going on I’ll hold a cover contest. The cover should somehow convey the identity of the class as a whole. First period classes (7:30 a.m.) characteristically depict a droopy-eyed student straggling in the door, etc. The class votes on the cover and the outcome lends excitement to the arrival of the books. I duplicate extra copies of the Class Directory for any mid-semester transfer students. Handing a new student a Class Directory makes the transition to a new school smoother.

The day the Directories come out (the sooner the better), I hold an Author’s Tea. I figure the students will ignore me that day anyway, so serving punch and cookies keeps me busy.

Over the years I’ve asked students to jot down how they felt about this assignment, and these are some of their comments:

“When I saw my article and read it, right away I thought about how I could have made it better.”

“This is my first ever published piece. Let’s do more of it!”

“I felt I had to write my very best for fear John would feel downgraded if I didn’t.”

“We foreign students don’t speak too much with American friends, so we don’t know much about our classmates. This makes me feel warm and friendly.”

“Personally, I think it would really help a lot if I were a new kid. Being handed a Class Directory is the fastest and easiest way to know the whole class at once.”

Clearly it doesn’t matter what you call it. I call it a Class Directory. My students good naturedly call it a Bring and Brag Rag. A transfer student from Texas once called it a Lifesaver. But I’ll definitely keep doing it because it involves all of us in the process with each other.

Note: The Original idea for a Class Directory came from Trudy Keller during the 1978 Anchorage Writing Project Invitational Institute.

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