Quoc Tin and Sona: The Story of a Peer Journal Project

by

MYRON BERKMAN

I'm slowly disengaging myself from being the source of all knowledge in the classroom and inching towards building a community of learners, all learning from each other. Well... I might as well jump in and see what happens ... (excerpt from my teacher journal)

No one ever spotted Duong Quoc Tin and Sona Diwa hanging out together in the school lunchroom. Quoc Tin, a Vietnamese immigrant, the perfect student, a voracious learner and constant note taker, found his friends among other Vietnamese boys. Sona, who had studied English in her native India, would have seen herself as too sophisticated in her up-to-the-minute-jeans to have much to do with the less savvy Quoc Tin. Yet these two students became friends of a sort, sharing experiences and ideas and helping each other learn. I can take some credit as the matchmaker in this unlikely relationship. Quoc Tin and Sona became acquainted through the peer journals I was using in my classes.

The basic idea of the peer journal is to pair students in two different classes — in my case an intermediate ESL class and a World Civilization class — and have them write letters to each other about themselves and about the subject matter they are studying. The expectation is that, uninhibited by a teacher's intrusions, students will begin to feel comfortable with one another and start to take pleasure in sharing their experiences and ideas about the content of their studies.

This technique sometimes works well and sometimes does not. For Quoc Tin and Sona, peer journals were liberating, and in this paper I want to take a close look at this pairing and try to figure out why it clicked.

Getting Started

My experiment with peer journals occurred at Newcomer High School in San Francisco, a school dedicated to teaching recently-arrived immigrants and refugee youth from around the world. In any class I could expect to be working with — for starters — Central American, Chinese, Vietnamese, Russian, Arabic and Filipino students. Our school serves as a port of orientation for these students to both the school system and the United States. There are no native speakers at Newcomer, and the majority of students have had six years or less of education in their country.

The goals I set for my peer journal project, then, were intimately connected to the Newcomer environment. First, since our school population consisted solely of immigrants and refugees, I wanted to see if students from different cultures could become comfortable using English by engaging in a written conversation with each other. Fluency, not accuracy, was what interested me. Students must feel at ease with English before they can worry about grammar.

Additionally, I wanted to see if students could use their own experiences and backgrounds as resources for each other. I thought that the World Civilization curriculum provided a unique opportunity to tap the richness of my multi-cultural classroom.

Next, I wanted to see if the students could write about the content they were studying. I didn’t want them
just memorizing facts. Could they integrate what they were studying into meaningful communication with another student? And finally, as a teaching goal, I wanted to see if I could integrate my curriculum in the two classes, getting more writing into my World Civilization class and more content into my ESL class.

My ninth grade World Civilization class was a sheltered class composed of students from over a dozen countries, including Mexico, India, Vietnam, Russia, El Salvador, Iran, China and Nicaragua. At our school most of the students study history in bilingual classes, but my class was composed of those students who did not speak one of the major language groups — such as Spanish, Chinese, or Vietnamese — and other students who for special reasons were assigned to my class. Students from ESL 1 through ESL 5 were placed in this multilevel class, an arrangement that brought with it obvious difficulties. In World Civilization we were expected to study some of the early civilizations such as China, Egypt, and India.

In many journals I found little writing about content and much writing about typical adolescent issues such as school, homework, teachers, and boyfriends and girlfriends.

My ESL class, on the other hand, was grouped by level: an intermediate ESL 3 class, which meant that most of the students had studied English perhaps for a couple of years in their country. In the class we focused on communicative competency with lots of opportunities for the students to speak using dialogues, role-plays, and skits. During the second hour of this two hour class we usually focused on writing.

To begin my project I paired up students from the two classes. I tried to match each student with a partner from a different country so as to facilitate as much exchange and learning as possible. Each pair of students shared a notebook, which always remained in the classroom. They wrote two or three times a week for fifteen to twenty minutes. Because I was interested in getting students to write about content, I asked students to write about topics they were studying. For example, I asked my World Civilization students to ask their partners if they knew anything about the country we were studying.

Sometimes the topic would spring from the ESL class. During Halloween, we had a discussion about superstitions. I asked the ESL students to write to their partners about a superstition in their country and to find out about one in another country. The students then wrote essays about superstitions around the world.

At the end of the year, the journals contained an abundance of writing. But how could I use this writing to answer my original questions? At first I planned to compare several sets of journals. But the writing was so different that it was hard to compare. Many of the ESL students were writing at a higher level than their World Civilization counterparts. Some students would write two or three paragraphs, while their partners could only respond with one or two lines. In many journals I found little writing about content, and much writing about typical adolescent issues such as school, homework, teachers, and boyfriends and girlfriends.

But the biggest problem was continuity. Our school’s population was very transient and students were constantly moving in and out of classes. Very few partnerships remained intact. I often had to change writing partners two or three times. It was difficult to compare the writing in a partnership of five months to a partnership of two to three weeks.

I looked through many journals and found a few pairings that had managed to stay intact throughout the school year. One of these pairs was Duong Quoc and Sona. I decided to look at their journal to see if I could find out why their pairing succeeded.

Duong Quoc Tin was in my ESL 3 class and had been in the United States for about ten months. He was a good student who worked extremely hard and got almost all A’s in my class. Prior to coming to America, he had studied for three months in a simulated American high school program in a refugee camp in the Philippines. Sona, one of my World Civilization students, had been in the United States for six months, but Sona had studied English in India so her English level was higher than Quoc Tin’s.

**Encouraging the Personal**

Between the two of them, they generated so much writing, I didn’t know where to start. With the help of
Courtney Cazden at the Bread Loaf School of English, I looked for a sustained period of time during which both students had focused on the same topic. At the beginning of the year their journals lacked continuity. For example, Quoc Tin might write about school, but Sona would respond about a personal matter. However, for about two months in the early spring, both students seemed to be focusing on the topic of India and South East Asia. Quoc Tin begins this interchange:

Dear Sona,
Feb. 16-89

How have you been? I haven't seen you a long time already. I think you don't come to school on these days. Are you sick or you change school. If you sick, I hope you're better now. I heard Mr. Berkman say you're studying about India now in your World Civilization subject. He told me to give you some ideas about India. I am Indian, I have better than mine. I've been studying about India from Mr. Vu already. I think I've got some of them to tell you. As I've studied, India is located in Asia. Its civilizations was located in the Indus River.

-Quoc Tin

Dear Quoc Tin,
2/23/89

Hi! How are you? I am sorry I was sick for a long time. First I got chicken pox and then after one day I immediately got flu.

In Mr. Berkman's class we are studying about India. I am myself Indian so it's not so difficult for me to understand. Tomorrow is India day in Mr. Berkman's class. Tomorrow I and my two friends are going to bring food and some Indian songs. O.K. See you next time. If you can give me a reply.

-Sona

Quoc Tin's writing is very advanced for a first-year ESL student. Although there are some minor errors with tenses and phrases such as "you know better than mine" (sic), his use of the present perfect tense demonstrates good use of language for a first-year ESL student.

But even more importantly, Quoc Tin weaves both content and personal reference into his letter. He shows concern for his partner by immediately inquiring where she has been. His keen awareness of audience is demonstrated even more so when he points out the incongruity of writing about India to an Indian. Even though the period ended before he could finish writing about India, his two sentences summarize a major point of ancient Indian civilization: Indian civilization began along the Indus River.

Sona's writing shows an instant familiarity. She begins with "Hi!" She not only tells him that she was sick, but even describes her illness. Then she proudly tells what she and her friends are going to do for India Day. Each month I devote a day to the country we are studying. Students are asked to bring in cultural items such as food, clothes and music from that country. Sona's admission was quite surprising. For the past week I had been trying to persuade Sona to participate in India Day. It was like pulling teeth! She insisted she had no Indian clothes and couldn't cook. I wasn't sure if India Day was going to take place. Yet, in her letter to Quoc Tin, she breezily tells him all about it. As might be predicted, her writing to her partner is more revealing than her communication to the teacher.

**Going into Depth**

The next few exchanges are dominated by two topics, one related to a question about black and white people and the other related to a definition of a Vietnamese trait. Both were content issues from the World Civilization class. Even though Quoc Tin was in my ESL class, he became actively involved in writing about these topics. It was at this time that both classes watched the movie Gandhi.

Dear Sona,
Mar. 1

I just saw a movie about an Indian, Gandhi. He has brown skin, and the white people don't want to do anything together with the brown or black people. Gandhi hates it and he wants to change this system.

-Quoc Tin

Dear Quoc Tin,
Mar. 2

Today I also saw a movie Gandhi. Did you like him? I already knew the story about Gandhi because I used to study in India. ... Do you believe in black and brown people?

-Sona
Quoc Tin’s letter is focused on content. There is no reference to Sona. His observation on the attitudes of white people is an acute one. He made it after watching Gandhi get thrown off a first-class South African train car because he is “colored.”

Sona is more focused on communicating with Quoc Tin. Her breezy personable style contrasts with Quoc Tin’s more formal writing. Her last question, “Do you believe in black and brown people?” triggers a series of exchanges over the next three letters.

In these next letters, the students reach a new level of communication. Both of them begin referring back to previous letters in order to understand each other. Quoc Tin’s writing starts to open up in response to Sona.

Dear Sona,
March 15

How are you? ... Today, I’ve already finished all the movie about Gandhi. I think Gandhi is a very nice man and sometimes he’s very stupid, too. He always thinks for his people. He doesn’t care about him. He is also a very stubborn person. He wants to wear his own clothes (make by the Indians). He doesn’t want to wear the foreign clothes or anything that’s not made by the Indian. ...

Sona! Last time you ask me, “Do you believe in black and brown people?” I don’t understand what you mean. Would you please explain it?

Thank You
-Tin Duong

Dear Quoc Tin,

How are you? I am sorry I didn’t write you for a long time. In previous letter I asked you about black and white. I meant that do you believe that black and white people are different. What does “tanh hieu hoc” means? O.K. bye. I will write you next time. Thank you.

Yours friend,
-Sona

Quoc Tin continues to write very well about the assigned topic, Gandhi. Again he deftly integrates his own opinion into his summary of the movie. He shows a keen understanding of Gandhi’s obstinacy in refusing to wear foreign clothes. In the last paragraph, for the first time a direct question is asked about something written in the journal. Quoc Tin asks Sona to clarify her question about black and brown people. The use of the exclamation point after her name shows that this is important to him. He wants to answer her question, but he needs more information. He politely asks her to explain more fully.

Since Sona was absent for several weeks, she probably had to refer back to her letter written a month ago in order to answer Quoc Tin’s question. Even though she changes the colors “black and brown,” to “black and white,” her intention is clear. She wants to know if Quoc Tin thinks that people with different skin colors are different.

Immediately after explaining the black-white question, Sona introduces a new topic, Southeast Asia. She asks Quoc Tin about “tanh hieu hoc.” Sona had come across this term in a handout from her World Civilization class. Sona demonstrates reading comprehension and responsiveness by picking out this one Vietnamese term to ask her partner from a variety of terms she had been studying about Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.

Increasing Comfort, Increasing Fluency

In the next exchange, Quoc Tin’s writing style continues to evolve. His formal content-based writing is changing to a more comfortable conversational tone of writing to a friend.

Dear Sona,
April 11, 1989

How are you? thanks a lot for your writing. I enjoyed read it very much. I think you’re too busy on your work so you don’t have time to write letters for me, but it’s O.K. ... I would like to answer your question about black and white people. In my opinion, black and white people are the same. They are all human being and they should have equal rights.

Dear Sona! something you asked me in your letter, is that Vietnamese or English. Would you write a little more clearly please, so I can read it easily.

Thanks.
From your friend
-Duong Quoc Tin
Quoc Tin is writing to a friend now. The first paragraph is written completely on a personal level. This contrasts sharply with his previous letters. He answers Sona’s provocative question about “black and white people” with remarkable succinctness and clarity. “In my opinion, black and white people are the same. They are all human being and they should have equal rights.” Then Quoc Tin turns to Sona’s latest inquiry, about “tanh hieu hoc.” He wants to answer her question, but Sona’s writing of the Vietnamese words is not legible to him.

The next day Sona answers in her longest letter to date. She too is feeling more comfortable and is now able to express some of her feelings.

Dear Quoc Tin
4/12/89

... I read your letter. ... I am glad you wrote me. ... Actually my problem is I don’t finish my homework at home. So I do in classroom. Everyday I get a lot of homework. I am so confused about what should I do. That’s the reason I am so busy. I am moody. Most of the times I get tired during last period and I don’t write. I think you must be getting a lot of time. You are a intelligent student.

Now a days we are studying about Southeast Asia. It’s little hard. All different kinds of names and they are hard to pronounce. ... In previous letter I wrote you a word, “tanh hieu hoc.” It’s in Vietnamese. I wanted to know that what does it mean. If you don’t know I don’t mind just forget it. O.K. Mr. Berkman is telling to stop. So see you in next letter. Bye.

Thanks
Your Friend,
-Sona

Dear Sona,
Apr. 24, 1989

How are you? Did you have a nice weekend? When I read your letter, I knew that you’re very busy on your work so you can’t write for me. But it’s O.K., because it’s more important for you to do your work than to write for me. You are even intelligent but diligent too.

In your letter, you asked me what does “Tanh hieu hoc” mean. It means that someone likes to study or to learn something news.
-Duong Quoc Tin

Sona is clearly opening up here. But even more important, finally, two and a half weeks after the initial query, Quoc Tin is able to answer Sona’s question about “tanh hieu hoc.” Quoc Tin makes sure to include the correct accent marks. Sona’s negligence in writing these marks prevented Quoc Tin from deciphering the words in the first place. In the reading unit, “Tanh hieu hoc” was defined as a Vietnamese trait of showing a great respect or love for education. “Somebody who likes to study” is a reasonable explanation from a beginning-level English student.

Conclusion
What stands out in this brief study of a writing exchange is the change in voice by both students. As both Sona and Quoc Tin begin to feel more comfortable in their writing, they are able to express themselves more clearly and become more responsive, taking risks, asking questions, sharing opinions and expressing inner feelings. Real communication is going on. Both students become more aware of their audience and adjust accordingly. Quoc Tin probably goes the farthest. At first his letters are stiff and very content-oriented. But responding to Sona’s more personal, informal way of writing, his writing slowly becomes less formal.

Students writing for a real audience are motivated writers.
And when that audience is a peer, young writers may blossom in surprising ways.

Sona’s first few letters are short, almost terse. As she grows more relaxed writing to her “new friend,” her letters become not only longer, but more revealing. Sona’s final letter of this exchange helps explain why her earlier letters were so short. Sona’s revealing admissions about herself are more significant in light of what she had to say later about her letter writing. In an interview after this project ended, she said that one of the most remarkable things about this project for her was that it was the first time she had ever really communicated about feelings with a boy. By the end of this writing exchange, both students were writing with an easy familiarity.
Even though not every pairing succeeds as dramatically as did the team of Sona and Quoc Tin, I am convinced that letter writing is a wonderful way to teach writing. Students writing for a real audience are motivated writers. And when that audience is a peer, young writers may blossom in surprising ways.

I would recommend this project to any teacher, regardless of level — but with a few caveats:

First you'll need to determine how you are going to pair your students. If the writing levels of the two students are vastly different, they will both become frustrated. Other pairing decisions depend on your objective. I try to pair students of different ethnic group so more cultural learning can take place, but this may not always be possible.

The logistics will loom large. You must have a regular time block. I ask my students to write two or three times a week, usually in the last 20 minutes of the period. A further small but important point: You'll need to make sure that the journal shared by the two students remains in the room at all times.

Even with the best of plans, however, do not expect this activity to run smoothly. In my case students constantly move in and out of my classes. In January, one entire class exited. One of my classes had 30 students, while the other class had 25. I was constantly trying to find new partnerships. Sometimes I asked higher-level students to write to two partners. Or in a few instances, I got students from another class to participate.

Despite these minor aggravations, I will continue to use peer journals. I'll do this because I have watched students like Quoc Tin and Sona connect during these exchanges, becoming more engaged with language as they struggle to communicate their ideas. Focusing on this important communication with a friend, they are thinking not at all about the writing proficiency test, yet with most every exchange they are becoming demonstrably more proficient writers.

Myron Berkman, a teacher consultant with the Bay Area Writing Project, now teaches at Mission High School in San Francisco, CA.