I Can’t See You, But I Know You: An Intergenerational Literacy Program

Even with the advances in writing instruction in recent years, there is one area that seems very much stuck in neutral. For the most part, the only adult who reads and responds to student writing is the teacher. Limiting and tedious are a couple of the kinder adjectives that could be used to describe this process. In this article, as they present their intergenerational literacy program, Anne DiPardo and Pat Schnack demonstrate productive ways out of this potentially unhealthy rut.

Anne DiPardo and Pat Schnack

How often does a thirteen-year-old write to an adult? There are, of course, the required school compositions, directed to the teacher’s eyes only, and the often coerced note thanking a grandparent for Christmas money. But seldom does this writing have the immediacy and voice of a note slipped surreptitiously across the classroom to a boyfriend or girlfriend. In this article we demonstrate a strategy for getting kids and adults—in this case older adults—to talk to each other on paper. Further, we’ll make the case for the benefit of this kind of cross-generational written communication.

We focus here on a boundary seldom considered in classrooms and schools as we explore emerging relationships between senior-citizen volunteers and eighth-grade language arts students engaged in joint literacy activities. At first glance, the elderly volunteers may seem less-than-promising candidates for fostering a new generation’s twenty-first century literacy. Their preferred tools may be less high tech, to be sure, but when it comes to the challenge of forging relationships with unfamiliar audiences, seniors offer plenty by way of uncharted territory. Excluding close family members, the average thirteen-year-old is decidedly unlikely to seek the company of elderly people; and while senior citizens represent an influential and rapidly growing voting bloc, too many are out of touch with the young people whose futures will be profoundly influenced by their votes.

Eager to foster closer relationships across the generations and greater engagement in reading and writing, Pat founded a program some years ago called “Partners in Reading,” which paired her eighth-grade language arts students with volunteers recruited through a local chapter of the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (Schnack 2001). In an initial five-week cycle in the fall, the young people chose books to read together and corresponded with their senior partners in weekly response journals. In the spring, as Pat’s class explored issues related to discrimination, she asked students to select books about the Holocaust and other human rights abuses from books she had collected. Each time, the young people and seniors wrote weekly entries, and parent volunteers shuttled the journals between the local senior center and Pat’s classroom. The partners ordinarily met in person just twice over the course of the year, as the young people traveled to the local senior center at the conclusion of the fall exchange, and the group gathered for lunch late in the spring.

As Pat began making retirement plans, we set about recording participants’ experiences over one of the final years that she would facilitate the program. Between September 2000 and May 2001, we followed twenty-three senior-eighth-grader pairs, transcribing their fall and spring journals, and conducting individual as well as joint interviews. We watched as the partners offered their first tentative greetings to one another, as their relationships slowly evolved, and as many came to
describe one another as unlikely but treasured friends.

In the account that follows, much of the time we allow the narrative to speak for itself. But we want to alert readers here to what we see as some of the benefits of these exchanges for students. The story of this exchange will, we believe, support these generalizations.

- This challenge in authentic writing pushed students beyond mere classroom exercise.
- Because the writers did not initially see each other, ageist bias was filtered out.
- The awkwardness of initial face-to-face communication among strangers was not an issue.
- Obsession about “correct” writing was displaced by a desire to communicate.
- For both the eighth-graders and the seniors, stereotypes were replaced by knowledge about a real person.
- As students and adults shared the reading of a historical work set in a period familiar to seniors, the seniors were able to supplement students’ understanding with personal stories.
- The seniors became mentors, helping the students through some difficult times.
- The seniors offered support and praise for the students, who may seldom have received this kind of recognition from adults outside of their immediate circle.
- The seniors pushed the students, with varied success, to discuss “adult issues” by considering the broader implications of the texts.
- The exchange provided an accurate simulation of electronic communications that requires us to connect through words with people we have not seen.

**October Beginnings**

When it came time to write their initial entries, these young people and seniors sat staring at the blank pages of their journals for what seemed to most a long time. Pat gave the nervous correspondents suggestions for these initial introductions, encouraging them to get acquainted before diving into discussion of their chosen books. The young people went first, most clinging fast to Pat’s suggestions, yet managing to communicate something of their enthusiasm and personalities, too. Martha, a retired schoolteacher, found out that her thirteen-year-old partner Lance watched *Rugrats* on Nickelodeon “every day at 6:30 P.M. central time,” loved winter (“because there is a lot more things to do during the winter such as sledding, snow ball fights and ice skating”), and chose John Jacques’s *Redwall* because “it has the sort of action, fantasy, drama, and parts of sadness.”

A few approached these first entries with the same channel-surfing chattiness that marked their in-person talk. “My name is Ruby,” one girl told her elderly partner, a World War II veteran and retired hospital administrator named Norman:

>I am 13 and I live with my mom and dad, oh yeah and my 2 cats there names are Amber and Humphry. I choose *Harry Potter and the sorcer’s stone* because I love the *Harry Potter* books, I have already read this book, but I want to read it again because it is really good, believe me. Have you already read it? Do you have any children? I am a only child, I guess you could say that I am lucky, but sometimes I am lonely. Do you have any brothers and sisters? My favorite subjects in school are American studies (History) and science, and sort of math. I am not very good at math so I am in easy math. I like easy math, I am doing very good in it. What were your favorite subjects in school? Well, I think that you will like this book. And this is the first book of a series. I am on the fourth book and I am almost done.

_Sincerely,_

_Ruby_

Despite Pat’s encouragement to venture into unfamiliar territory, Ruby and Lance were not alone in clinging cautiously to books they knew to be interesting (when it comes to *Harry Potter*, Ruby explained, “nothing boring happens”). Connecting with elderly strangers, perhaps, seemed challenge enough. Lance worried particularly about being paired with a woman, privately complaining that he would have to mask his interest in action plots and violence. While Lance imagined old people as pot-bellied, cranky, and nostalgic (“my grandma has a big pot-belly”), Ruby didn’t like thinking about old age, conjuring images of a “boring” nursing home, where “you couldn’t go out and play baseball or anything.” In beginning-of-year interviews, many of the young people voiced similar apprehensions, describing the elderly as sadly sidelined—perhaps “peaceful” and “quiet” but also disabled, grouchy, and out of touch.

As the weeks went by, however, many of the young people expressed a new sense of satisfaction in getting to know their partners through writing. Many students told us that had they met initially in person, their nervousness would have left

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1 All quotes from the seniors’ and students’ journals are unedited, with surface errors retained.
them awkward, silent, and not nearly as receptive to what the seniors had to say; but in the journals, as one put it, "you get to know each other bit by bit." Ruby would be especially glad for the opportunity to connect with Norman through their journal, as he selectively picked up threads in her often frenetic entries, asking engaging questions about her life and thoughts on *Harry Potter*. "You can't judge people on how they dress or how they look," Ruby said of their "meeting" in the journals, "you'll get to know them first. That's what some people do. They judge people on how they look, and they don't get to know them." While Ruby's and Lance's partners were able-bodied, not all were. Some of the eighth-graders paired with disabled seniors were particularly grateful for the chance to get acquainted on the page, confessing that the sight of crutches, walkers, or portable oxygen tanks might have left them less inclined to strike up conversations.

Even as the seniors and young people alike apologized for their self-perceived lack of writing ability, as time went on these correspondences fostered a sense of warm mutual interest (DiPardo and Schnack 2004). The seniors seemed interested not only in the young people's responses to their shared books but also in their lives—sharing grief over a lost pet, offering comfort where friendships ended or parents filed for divorce, and showing concern over a host of sports injuries and persistent illnesses. As the weeks passed, the young people were increasingly bold in inquiring into the seniors' activities and preoccupations, often offering advice (particularly on computer matters) and empathetic concern. Surprised by the range of these elders' active and often adventuresome lives, the young people also came to know their vulnerabilities, as several seniors were distracted by their own health problems or, as in Norman and Martha's cases, the serious illnesses of people they loved.

**Scenes from the Spring Exchanges**

**Ruby and Norman.** As the partnerships resumed again in the spring, Ruby and Norman were particularly enthusiastic about reconnecting, having enjoyed their fall conversations about *Harry Potter* and two brief in-person meetings—one at the conclusion of the fall exchange and a second when they brought them together for a joint interview, where they spent an hour smiling, laughing, and finishing one another's sentences.

Ruby began her first entry of the spring:

"How are you?" I'm okay...I'm moving into a new house, we are moving because my parents are getting a divorce...but, in the summer my mom said that I could get a puppy! A lot of things are happening to me, some good, most bad, like my 2 best friends are moving away. Is anything exiting happening to you?

Things were happening in Norman's life, but he turned first to the book Ruby had chosen from Pat's collection of holocaust novels—Silver Days, which chronicles the continuing saga of Lisa Platt, whose Jewish family came to the United State after escaping prewar Nazi Germany. Lisa struggles to adjust to her family's new poverty and the realities of American bigotry, holding fast to her desire to resume study of her beloved ballet.

Norman, who was in his late teens as these historical events were unfolding, recognized something of his own family's character in the Platts, who come across as brave and tenacious but also given to occasional moments of despair. "I will have no problem relating to the characters," he wrote, "and I hope you will be able to imagine yourself in the place of Lisa." In this first spring entry, Norman also acknowledged Ruby's apparent distress and tried to offer comfort:

I'm sorry that with all the things happening in your life you feel that while some are good most are bad. Even though your parents are getting a divorce remember it's not your fault and you still have two parents that love you. Even though your two best friends are moving away you can still keep in contact in a lot of ways—mail, email, telephone, perhaps even visiting. Also you have the opportunity to make new friends to fill that gap. What kind of puppy do you think you'll get? What names are you considering?

Finally, Norman responded to Ruby's query about events in his own life, beginning with a family trip to Colorado over the winter holidays and a gently humorous account of his first time on skis. Then this: "Also my wife is going to the hospital next week to have a cancerous tumor removed from her left lung. We are confident it will result in a cure. Everything looks positive."

"First of all," began Ruby's next entry, "I hope nothing more but for your wife to be okay!" Ruby went on to describe her last skiing trip and her propensity for falling down ("Did you fall down?"). She moved quickly to the topic of dogs, responding along the way to Norman's question about names:

Do you have a dog? If you do, what is her/her name? I'm thinking of
naming it Leo, Liver, Barnaby, or Eddy if it is a boy and Opal, Abby, Reah, Mac-Me or Lizzie if it is a girl. I’ve been looking at the animal shelter for puppies, and I’ve seen a few, I get to get my dog in the summer, so I can potty train it, that’ll be really . . . um . . . . interesting to watch! Do you have any pets?

While Ruby’s entry was all breathless topic-shifting, Norman’s response would address each topic in turn, starting with his wife’s homecoming in a few days (“things will start to get back to normal”), continuing with his relative success at skiing (“of course I wasn’t trying any fancy moves”), and memories of his boyhood dog (“a Boston bulldog named Bozo, named after a cartoon dog who was always getting in trouble”). Finally, he nudged Ruby back to Silver Days, noting his sympathy for one of the characters, a Protestant young man whose father punished him for befriending the fictional Lisa. The boy was only “trying to be friendly,” Norman observed, “but his dad was one of those people who hate anyone because he doesn’t have what he considers to be the right color skin, the right religion, the right sexual preference, etc.”

Ruby and Norman would reflect on the bigotry depicted in the novel over several subsequent entries, feeling sorry for the fictional victims and wondering together why such attitudes live on. When Norman asked Ruby about prejudice at her junior high, she began with an answer, but as always, quickly shifted topics:

There is some prejudice in my school, not much, but some. Mostly it is all pre-judgements here, like what your culture is, people just assume that if your from a certain background you should look a certain way. Like me,

once someone thought that shape I’m a ton of Irish, I should have red hair, brown eyes, freckles, and a accent! Well, I don’t have red hair, I do have brown eyes, and freckles, but I don’t have a accent. What heritage background do you have?

Ruby included a pie chart, signifying her Irish, German, English, and Shawnee lineage in meticulously colored wedges. Norman’s next entry included a detailed account of his own background, complete with two mysteries: a Czech grandmother who may have been Jewish and a great-grandmother of uncertain ethnicity “who was the lone survivor of a wagon train going west.” In any case, Norman confessed, “I’ve never been too concerned with my ancestry, but more concerned with who I am now and who I will be.”

Once again, he closed with a series of observations and questions about Silver Days (“Is there anything in the book that makes you mad, angry or sad? Or anything that makes you feel happy?”), and noted in closing that he was off to the hospital to visit his wife.

Ruby was not in class on the day that she was to have written her final entry to Norman; his own last note registers regret, as he fumbled for things to say in the absence of Ruby’s rapid-fire questions and observations. He mused for a bit on the enduring reality of discrimination, marveling at the Boy Scouts’ decision to exclude gay leaders and boys (“I know of several homosexual persons who are of good moral character and a number of heterosexual persons who are morally bankrupt”). They would meet in person one last time at a party the following week, but Norman was clearly seeking a sense of closure. And his final line seemed to achieve just that, taking in the full sweep of their conversations over the year as well as his hopes for Ruby’s future: “Keep reading, keep a positive attitude, enjoy your new puppy, and maybe you, like Lisa, will be able to dance again.”

Lance and Martha. Lance was an eighth-grader who fastidiously avoided sounding anything close to earnest, although he’d described himself in an early-year interview as both “funny, and mature for my age.” Lance had gradually opened up over the course of the fall exchange, writing long entries about his many pets (including one cat “with a freckle on the tip of her nose that is so fat she resembles a foot ball” and “a lizard about to die of old age”), his recreational passions (bike riding and paintball), and the chores he completed each day before his single-parent mom arrived home from work. In an early-fall interview, Martha noted that she had made a point of complimenting Lance for being so responsible: “I thought to myself, he probably doesn’t want other kids his age to know that he does have to help get dinner on the table, that type of thing, but I want him to know some people appreciate that.” The opportunity to correspond about the holocaust and contemporary issues of discrimination was Martha’s favorite part of the program, and she had eagerly awaited the resumption of her correspondence with Lance.

Lance selected Jacob’s Rescue for the spring exchange, a book about young people caught up in the events of the holocaust. As it turned out, however, he would correspond with Martha not in their usual longhand journal, but over email—a technology to which she resorted, she’d once told us, only when “truly desperate.” One of her grown daughters was undergoing a bone-marrow transplant in a distant state, and
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Martha would be there for much of the spring, caring for grandchildren and minding the household. She was emphatic in her desire to keep up the correspondence, and Lance brightened as we told him this, listening closely as we explained what we knew about bone-marrow transplants. Only several weeks into the spring exchange did Lance ask Martha how her daughter was doing, adding weight to our suspicion that he was curious but hesitant to ask. Their spring journal primarily pursued other avenues, as Lance continued to enliven his entries with extended stories about his life, Martha maintained an engaged and friendly tone, and Jacob's Rescue presented opportunities to consider the somber realities of the holocaust.

"I must have been about 18, in 1945, when I first heard the word holocaust," Martha wrote. "A Life magazine showed horrible pictures of people who were basically skeletons, with skin covering their bones. The pictures showed U.S. soldiers throwing up as they opened the death camps to release the few prisoners remaining. We couldn't believe what one group of people could do to another!" Over the weeks she would encourage Lance to ponder how he would react if, like the fictional Jacob, "you and your mom lived in 2-3 rooms and barely had enough food to eat yourselves—and your mom took in another boy to share your food, bed, lives, and to top it all off, you could all be tortured and killed if anyone else discovered what you were doing."

Flying in the face of Lance's early assumption that an elderly woman "wouldn't be into war stuff," Martha wrote at length about her visits to military museums and holocaust sites, pointing out that the spirit of "Hitler's nonsense" has hardly vanished from the face of the earth. Witness certain son continued to seek rescue for the fictional Jacob. Martha's responses were detailed and provocative, recounting real episodes of selfless heroism among Nazi resisters, and explaining how her visits to London's Imperial War Museum and the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., had helped her grasp the grim realities of Hitler's reign. Lance studied each of Martha's emails with care and clearly wanted to write back in ways that would engage and entertain her. While he seemed moved by Jacob's Rescue and enthralled by Martha's memories of World War II, his own entries assumed a lighter register more in keeping with his usual presentation of self. In a marked departure from typical patterns of classroom discourse (Cazden 1988), Lance repeatedly offered extended and often gently humorous stories of his life outside of school. Knowing Martha's sense of humor when it comes to cats, for instance, he recounted a recent tornado warning—an hour before his mom was to come home from work—leaving Lance to round up the household pets:

The dog was the easy part. All he did was just wag his tail and I carried him down into the basement because he is about the size of a beagle and was very old and had back problems in the past. The cats were the killer part. Each one of them would just run back up the steps after I had put them down in the basement. One of them even started to freak out and started to slash at my arm in it's frantic madness. It turns out that the tornado withered away before it could cause any harm.

Imagine trying to connect with a stranger whose experiences are quite different from your own—and imagine further that nearly all of your communications will be through writing.
Ever the topic of conversation, Iowa’s changeable spring weather would take another strange turn just one week later, as Lance and his friends rode their bikes “in a large forest” finally reaching “the highest peak of a hill.” To most eyes, the local terrain features neither large forests nor high peaks, so perhaps Lance’s memory of the temperature hovering around 90 degrees represents a further bit of artistic license. It was, in any case, a hot day, and as Lance stood on the top of that hill, he felt dry and thirsty:

So I yelled at the top of my lungs, “Please let it rain!” To our surprise about 5 minutes later it began to pour so hard we could not see where were going. Once we reached my home our clothes were soaked. Just yesterday we went bike riding once more and just to see if it worked again we yelled out, “Please let it rain!” My prophecy was correct. It began to pour so hard our bikes fell into the mud. Thunder cracked and we saw about ten fingers of acid white lightning fall from the sky.

Factual liberties notwithstanding, Lance’s notes to Martha were as engaging and vivid as anything he would produce all year. These little dramas were enlivened with a level of detail often missing from his classroom-based assignments. Meanwhile, this student who had begun the year thinking of senior citizens as “chubby” people with “big bifocals” and a tendency to be “kind of mean” found unanticipated satisfaction in his developing relationship with Martha. Once he met her, Lance confessed in a joint interview, he realized that she had quite a lot in common with the one senior with whom he already had a close relationship. “She kind of reminded me of my grandma,” he said with a smile, “always laughing.” As if to confirm the description, Martha chuckled as she observed, “Well, I’ve got a grandson your age.” Plus, she confided in a sly whisper, recalling their first in-person meeting, “I liked his haircut.”

**Managing the Multiple Demands of Real-World Writing**

Relying on writing as their primary means of establishing and maintaining relationships, these partners approached their entries with care and, increasingly, flashes of stylistic daring. Pat had talked all year about spicing one’s writing with vivid detail, but seldom had she seen lines that matched Lance’s “ten fingers of acid-white lightening” or the playful elaboration of Ruby’s ethnic pie chart. As they shifted among topics—wondering about the motivations of fictional characters, deliberating about names for a new pet, offering comfort, or simply entertaining with creatively embellished stories—these correspondents felt free to use writing toward multiple ends, crafting entries that negotiated among demands at once relational and communicative, academic and personal. Students who tended to block still felt stuck sometimes, and those who generally made lots of surface-level errors were not magically transformed into unfailing editors; Pat’s experience over the years has suggested, however, that students have for the most part written more and also proofread more carefully when corresponding in journals with partners.

Imagine trying to connect with a stranger whose experiences are quite different from your own—and imagine further that nearly all of your communications will be through writing. For most of us, the challenge of bridging chasms of difference (be they generational, cultural, linguistic, gendered, or socioeconomic) is formidable in itself, never mind the writing part of the equation. Technology has opened up opportunities that can tax our abilities as writers in expansive new ways—whether one is participating in the global marketplace, working for world peace, gathering urgently needed information, or tending personal relationships. Increasingly, we need to get to know people, to build a sense of trust and rapport, through the sometimes slippery medium of the written word. Doing so takes linguistic skill, tact, care, and a human willingness to reach out—all the dispositions that we watched these seniors and eighth-graders practice over the course of their year together. Their practicing may not have always looked smooth or perfect, but as motivational psychologists tell us, it’s the practice—and, perhaps more to the point, the willingness to practice—that can eventually make all the difference (Dweck 2003).

Today’s young people will encounter human differences of many kinds, differences made increasingly visible through mass media, world events, and the Internet. These seniors cannot begin to represent the full range of audiences these eighth-graders will encounter (nor, for that matter, do they represent contemporary senior citizens writ large). But we do think they provided opportunities to engage in a kind of writing many of us both relish and struggle with long after our school days are behind us—writing, that is, where much more than a grade is at stake. As these young people look to the challenges ahead, we hope they’ll remember these seniors’ kindly attention and reminders to be open-minded—and we

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hope they’ll remember, too, the experience of reaching toward connection on the written page, and the satisfactions of finding it there.

References


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Recently retired from the Iowa City Community School District, Pat Schnack currently teaches a content-area reading course to preservice teachers at the University of Iowa. She frequently serves as an educational consultant within the United States and also enjoys teaching English as a second language at summer day camps in other countries. She continues to assist with Partners in Reading, shuttling journals across town and serving as an adult correspondent. She has been affiliated for many years with the Iowa Writing Project.