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### One Bold Experiment

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## One Bold Experiment

### Author Biography

English and social studies teacher in Williamsburg, Virginia and Charleston, South Carolina; Social Studies, Foreign Language, and ESOL Team Associate in the Charleston County School District (85 urban, suburban, and rural schools); author of 5 books and dozens of journal articles including the Virginia English Bulletin Spring 1989; countless awards for teaching and writing; conference speaker.

### Abstract

A monthly exchange of letters from 165 seventh graders in an arts school in Charleston, South Carolina to similar classrooms in 16 countries around the world proved to be the writing project that captured every state writing standard all at once – brainstorming, writing, collaboration, analysis, proofreading, and re-writing. This one activity was the highlight of the year for each student as letters and gifts poured in from every continent September to June. This was truly a teacher's dream come true.

### Keywords

middle school, writing with a purpose, proofreading, international exchange

## One Bold Experiment

It was a bold experiment, a really zany idea. Would 165 seventh graders in six language arts classes write once a month to a class of students thousands of miles away, students they had never met before? Would they keep up the momentum? Would they persevere until June? No one really knew. But two teachers thought it was worth a try in order to get students to write clearly, spell accurately, and correspond in such a way that the letters' recipients would write back. The goal was eight exchanges a year – three in the fall, two in the winter, and three in the spring.

It almost seemed like an impossible idea. Where would we find willing teachers around the world? If we found them, would they have their students write once a month? If they would, could they write well enough in English? This seemed like a long shot because a lot of students around the world only begin to learn English when they are twelve or thirteen.

We were willing to give it a go. We thought between us, Mike and I, we could come up with enough friends in enough countries who would go to their local schools and ask for willing language arts teachers to help us out with this writing experiment. We figured we might hit .500, maybe a bit higher, but that was good enough for us. During the summer, we contacted our friends and told them our plans. They went to their local junior highs/middle schools and recruited teachers, many of whom were their friends. We received the teachers' names and the schools' addresses and felt ready to go by the time school began.

The one question we still had was whether this should be an actual exchange of letters or just a very long e-mail to which every student contributed. After a lot of thought and weighing the pros and cons, we decided to send actual letters that would be word processed. We did this so every student could actually hold a letter in his or her hand and feel connected to a student or several students somewhere else in the world. We felt this was really important and would generate enthusiasm for the project.

Letters had to be succinct. Words had to be spelled correctly. Ideas had to be clearly thought out. Students could not use colloquialisms or slang. All of this was hard for seventh graders, especially students in an arts magnet school that had art majors and a unique schedule. The scope and concept of the school was hard to explain to others. But students caught onto the idea and ran with it. They were more than happy to talk about their school, their major, their day, and their teachers. It was just what Mike and I hoped would happen.

To avoid unnecessary repetition and provide some degree of order to the project, the international teachers agreed to follow an outline of topics we suggested: September – our school, October – our family, November – hobbies we enjoy, December/January – holidays and traditions, February – clubs and extracurricular activities we participate in, March – the sports we like, April – what’s special about our town/city, May – summer fun.

Letters were written and re-written any number of times. They had to be as good as they could be before they got popped into the mailing envelopes and taken to the post office. No one every complained about the process. They really understood why every sentence had to be carefully composed. They didn’t want to be misunderstood or embarrassed. Proofreading became a part of every writing session, a teacher’s dream come true – finally!

Students could send four letters every month. They chose the countries where they wanted their letters to go -- the Netherlands, Hungary, Canada, India, New Zealand, the Czech Republic, France, Tanzania, Sweden, England, the Philippines, Denmark, Japan, Taiwan, Germany, and Argentina. Mike and I arranged sixteen rectangular wire baskets clearly marked by country on top of a long line of waist-high book cases. Students put their completed letters there when they were finished with them. We trimmed each letter and discarded the extra paper to keep each packet of letters as light and compact as possible.

Mike and I then made one trip to the post office on the last Friday of each month with our sixteen packets. The post office workers got to know us after a while and often inquired about our project. They thought it was a great idea and kept saying that this type of project should have been around when they were in school. We agreed. We didn’t have anything like this either. School was too routine when we were growing up. Oh, well. At least we were doing something unique and different. Our students and their parents thanked us, and that was all that mattered.

And then we waited. It took a while for our packages to go around the world, get opened, get answered, get put back in the mail, and then received. But boy were our students happy when packages began arriving! They couldn’t wait to open the envelopes (and sometimes small boxes) that came. Students immediately got to work answering their newly-made friends’ questions and had return letters to go fairly quickly. Once the writing and sending process got going, packages arrived at the school two to three times a week. This steady stream of mail kept students busy and engaged. They always heard from at least one of their pen pals

if not all four of them, and they always had letters ready to be mailed by the time the next batch of envelopes was sent.

Thus began an in-depth study of schools, family life, holidays, customs, traditions, sports, and communities around the world. The seventh-grade geography/history (actually called Contemporary Cultures: 1600 to the Present) teacher was pleased, but we language arts teachers felt really fulfilled because students were composing, re-writing, proofreading, and publishing with a real purpose. Many friendships that began that year never ended. Some students were still writing their worldwide friends when they graduated. The experiment had really worked and exceeded our expectations. That's something we were quite proud of and glad we had accomplished. We had finally landed on something practical, meaningful, fun, and fairly effortless, and it hit all of the writing standards we were supposed to teach. The project was every middle school language arts teacher's dream, and it kept all of us looking forward to the mailman's arrival and the next set of envelopes that would come from far corners of the globe.

To be specific, these were the language arts/writing standards we felt the project addressed: 1) Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content, 2) Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective techniques, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences, 3) Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing, and 4) Write independently, legibly, and routinely for a variety of tasks, purposes, and audiences over short and extended time frames.

The seventh grade social studies literacy skills for the twenty-first century included the following: 1) Compare the locations of places, the conditions at places, and the connections between places, 2) Explain change and continuity over time and across cultures, 3) Identify and explain the relationships among multiple causes and multiple effects, and 4) Evaluate multiple points of view or biases and attribute the perspectives to the influences of individual experiences, societal values, and cultural traditions. The seventh grade social studies teacher felt that our project definitely reinforced the writing skills she was teaching in her classes. No matter in which class the skills were first taught, the skills would be reinforced throughout the year in both classes. This eagerness to collaborate helped students see connections between language arts and social studies and gave the rest of the faculty a good example of how teachers could work together to increase student achievement and actually enjoy a mutually beneficial project.

Learning should never take place in isolation as if each subject is a silo unrelated to the other subjects a student takes. Learning should always be interdisciplinary and integrated just as it is in real life. Because our students were writing friends in sixteen different parts of the world and because everyone was writing about the same subject each month – school, family hobbies, holidays, etc. – it was easy to compare locations around the world, hypothesize why people and their communities might be similar or different than ours, look for commonalities and differences in everyday life, try to speculate why something that took place in the past affected something in the present, and see how cultural traditions and societal values affect our perspectives of events, institutions, and day-to-day life. If nothing else, our project brought the world a little bit closer to our home town and started students thinking about how life was similar and different in every corner of the globe. This larger perspective was invaluable for our thirteen-year-olds and started them on a path of envisioning themselves visiting some of these places later in life and meeting the very friends they had encountered through letters in seventh grade.

In all, this international writing project lasted three years. We could have continued it for a longer period of time, but one of our teachers left to pursue other interests, and I was asked to teach an arts and humanities course in the high school (our campus has both a middle school and a high school). This course surveyed the major developments in the arts 1600 to the present – music, painting, architecture, sculpture, dance, theatre, fashion, and literature. Of course, I brought my interest in writing with me when I moved from the middle school to the high school, and my students responded to a daily blog and helped create a 150-page book every semester. The blog site [www.edublogs.org](http://www.edublogs.org) is free for all teachers and allows students to comment daily on a blog the teacher posts. I found it very useful because it allowed me to extend each lesson and incorporate material not able to be included in class that day. If the lesson was basically about music, the blog could cover painters, dancers, writers, playwrights, fashion designers, or something else.

The book project further extended all the themes of the course. Students paired up, chose an artist (painter, architect, musician, composer, writer, dancer, choreographer, thespian, fashion designer, etc.) and created two pages for the book using agreed upon margins, background color, font style, font size, titles, and captions. Each set of pages was approximately half text and half pictures. Art Bookbindery in Winnipeg, Manitoba published these books in full color for about \$15 a copy as long as we purchased 150 books. This was an incredibly exciting project and one very well received by the students, their parents, our

administrators, and other teachers at the school. Many books were given as holiday presents, birthday presents, or a Mother's Day/Father's Day gift. Representative titles included *All the World's a Stage: Arts and Humanities 1550-2000*, *World Cultural Centers*, *Artists Who Inspire Us*, *On the Edge: Artists Who Made a Difference*, and *Next Gen Artists: Artists of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.

Creative teachers will always find ways to incorporate writing into everything they do. If our seventh grade writing project had continued, we could have sent packages of letters around the world for many more years. We also could have changed it to send just a very long email to each international school with each student's contribution attached to it. We could have also decided to send letters just within our country, within our state, or within our school district using the courier mail. All of that would have saved some money. As it was, we wrote a small grant to cover postage expenses and got some help from our PTA, but not every teacher will be as lucky. In the end, each teacher must figure out how to make an exchange of letters work, how long to continue the project, when to change the project and try something new, and what to try next just to keep the momentum and interest going. It's not just the students who need variety from time to time. Teachers do too.

Relevancy seemed to be the driving force behind all of the above-mentioned projects. We teachers wanted to develop projects that would teach our students life-long skills. Good writing is certainly one of those skills. If students can't write and communicate effectively, they're going to be held back wherever they work. And we all know it's not just the language arts teachers who should be teaching effective writing skills. It's all of us. So the more we can develop collaborative projects that involve multiple teachers and multiple disciplines, the better. We hope we've begun to do our part at our school.