E-Pals: Using E-mail to Connect Pre-Service Teachers, Writing, and Rural Alaska Students

Lauren McClanahan
Western Washington University

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ABSTRACT

To a certain degree, every teacher is a teacher of reading and writing. No matter the content area, all teachers need to be skilled in the areas of reading and writing instruction, especially today in light of the wave of standards currently driving the curriculum in many states. The project detailed in this paper was used in a secondary education literacy course where only a handful of the students were going to go on to be English teachers. Throughout the academic quarter, the pre-service teachers featured in this paper learned about a common language used among many practicing teachers in the Pacific Northwest—the language of 6-Trait writing assessment. Not only did these pre-service teachers learn about the benefits of using 6-Trait language, but they also put their knowledge to work connecting with young writers from a rural fishing village on the edge of the Bering Sea. Together, these pre-service teachers and secondary students appreciated the specificity of using the 6-Trait language, but they also learned a great deal more. Personal connections were made, and a greater appreciation for differing cultures was achieved, as these students collaboratively learned within the vehicle of simple e-mail technology.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers have always been expected to accomplish many tasks simultaneously, and those teachers currently in the classroom are no exception. With standardized tests now driving the curriculum in many states, teachers are under even more pressure than ever to produce quantifiable results. How, then, among all of the other expectations placed upon classroom teachers can they be expected to improve writing, incorporate technology, and make multiculturalism a focus of their pedagogy? While much research has been conducted to il-lustrate the importance of each of those aspects of education, little has been written that demonstrates how, in a practical and effective way, teachers can weave writing, technology, and multiculturalism throughout their curriculum. This project modeled for secondary education students how to accomplish all three using a very simple premise and even simpler technology.

Writing Assessment: A brief history of the creation of a common language

Good writing. Teachers in all content areas purport to know it when they see it. However, when asked to pinpoint what makes a piece of

writing "good," the waters tend to become murky. Fortunately, teachers in Washington State, and in much of the Pacific Northwest, speak a common language when it comes to talking about writing: the 6+1 Trait Model of assessing writing.

In the early 1980s, the process approach to writing was being widely employed in composition classrooms. Rather than encouraging a formulaic approach to composition, the process approach to writing loosened the reigns on the formalist's reliance on structure. Students began to think of themselves as writers as they were encouraged to "do" what real writers do: choose their own topics, write in their own voices, freewrite, collaborate, map, peer-edit, and collect finished pieces in portfolios. During this same time, a group of teachers in Beaverton, Oregon and Missoula, Montana decided that they wanted to reconstruct their standardized writing assessment tools. These teachers wanted a framework from which they could not only assess student writing, but teach it as well—to use assessment to guide instruction. The framework that they developed "[is] an assessment tool that works in concert with the curriculum to guide instruction so all students can successfully meet their writing goals" (Culham, 2003, p. 19).

This group of teachers from Oregon and Montana wanted their framework to include what writers "do." When they failed to find instruments previously published that fit their needs, they decided to create an assessment instrument themselves:

> Those teachers knew there had to be a better way to assess student writing than with multiple-choice questions on a standardized, norm-referenced test, which provides information on how well students understand common rules and constructions of the English language, but not on their ability to write (Culham, 2003, p. 10).

Those teachers poured over hundreds of student-authored essays, and began to note the patterns that emerged. Finally, "lists were compiled, descriptors of quality were created, and common characteristics, or traits, emerged" (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2002, p.

4). Teachers now had a "language" to discuss what good writing looked like, and how to recognize it in a variety of forms. They also discovered what good writing teachers knew all along, that to assess student writing and have that assessment be instructive as well, the assessment must mirror quality writing. By developing a language centered around what good writing looks like, teachers had defined for themselves "the hidden criteria that lay under the surface of most writing process classrooms" (NWREL, 2002, p. 4).

After all of the reading and sorting of student essays, the following six themes, or traits, emerged:

- Ideas (details, development, focus)
- Organization (internal structure)
- Voice (tone, style, purpose, and audience)
- Word Choice (precise language and phrasing)
- Sentence Fluency (correctness, rhythm and cadence)
- Conventions (mechanical correctness)

Recently, a seventh trait, presentation, has been added as an optional stylistic feature to be considered. Presentation can include such items as handwriting, formatting, layout, etc.

According to NWREL (2002) literature, not all teachers use the same 6+1 TRAIT model when assessing student writing. Some use more traits, and some compress the list into four or five categories. However, most teachers involved with the creation of this assessment instrument agreed that the above attributes were the foundation of what constituted good writing, being careful to take grade level, the assigned task and specific content area into consideration. Now, teachers in Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington have a common language with which to teach and assess student writing *across* the curriculum.

Prior to taking part in this project, secondary education students had a "crash course" in using the 6+1 Trait Model of writing assessment. They were asked to compose an introductory letter to a potential cooperating teacher with whom to conduct their student teaching internship. The letter they wrote was scored based on

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the 6+1 Trait Model. Through weeks of composing and peer editing, students became comfortable conversing in the specific language of the model, and also learned that no matter the writing task, these traits could be applied.

Using technology to bridge cultural gaps: the challenge of exposing students to multiple viewpoints

E-mail technology is nothing new. In fact, for many secondary education students, e-mail is simply taken for granted, something they "do" as part of their daily routine. How, then, could they be encouraged to use a technology that they take for granted and turn it into a powerful learning tool? Given that e-mail is a text-oriented domain, using it to assist actual secondary students outside of Washington seemed like a good idea for this literacy methods course. Using e-mail technology to assist students with backgrounds far different than the college students seemed like an even better idea.

The population of pre-service teachers that participated in this project is predominately white. This is indicative of the university as a whole, but even more so in the college of education. And while many students are well-versed in the philosophy of multicultural education, many of them have had very little practical experience working with students whose background differed from their own. Therefore, rather than partner with a school locally, it was decided to take advantage of the relatively simple technology of e-mail and connect the pre-service teachers with students who live a much different lifestyle than the one to which they are accustomed.

While attending a conference in the spring of 2003, the author was introduced to an administrator from the Lower Kuskokwim School District in Bethel, Alaska. A conversation began, and it was realized that it might be beneficial for the pre-service teachers in Washington to pair up with secondary students from Tununak, a rural fishing village located in southwestern Alaska, approximately 240 miles west of Bethel. These students in Tununak used the 6+1 Trait Method of composing and assessing their writing, and they also had access to computers and

the Internet. The stage was set for a productive exchange.

THE PROJECT

As stated previously, the pre-service teachers felt confident with using the 6-Trait Method of writing assessment. They had worked independently and in groups on various writing tasks in which the 6-Traits were employed. Having a high degree of confidence, they were ready to take the next step and assess papers written by "real" secondary students.

Before the project began, the pre-service teachers were given a mini geography lesson. None of them knew where Tununak, Alaska was located, so the class visited the school district's web site. There, the students could see just how remote the village is. Tununak is located near the Bering Sea, on the northeast coast of Nelson Island, 519 miles northwest of Anchorage. According to the 2000 Census, Tununak has a population of 325. Of that, 97% are Native American. A traditional Yup'ik Eskimo village, many residents speak both the Yup'ik language as well as English. The population participates in an active fishing and subsistence lifestyle; however, there is an unemployment rate of nearly 20%. The school with which the exchange was conducted is the only school in the village. It is home to approximately 100 students ranging from pre-K through grade 12.

The first step in this project was to contact the secondary English teacher in Alaska. Introductions were made and an explanation given that the goal of the pre-service teachers was to gain exposure to middle/high school student writing so they, as future teachers, could sharpen their assessment skills. Although these college students were not all studying to be English teachers, they all realized the value of reading and writing in their particular content area, and they were eager to begin! In return for the secondary students sending their writing, the pre-service teachers would provide a close reading of the pieces that they had written, thus increasing their audience nearly twenty-fold.

The next step was for the students in Alaska to send their letters as Microsoft Word attach-

ments to the author's e-mail account. From there, the letters would be forwarded to the e-mail accounts of the pre-service teachers. This process was initially delayed due to a death in Tununak. The pre-service teachers learned that when a death occurs in Tununak, the village virtually shuts down for a week. However, the writing finally arrived, and was delivered to the correct e-mail accounts. Because there are twenty-three students in the literacy class and there were only 13 secondary students, most of the secondary students had two college students review their paper.

Once the pre-service teachers had their partner's writing, the assessment could begin. Students were given several guidelines regarding their responses and the time frame in which they were working. First, they were to respond to only the traits of ideas/content and organization. It was decided that responding to all six traits could be a bit overwhelming to the secondary students, and the college students wanted to be helpful rather than overly critical. Second, the pre-service teachers were encouraged to praise their partner's writing when it warranted praise (like a strong sense of voice or solid conventions), but to stick mainly to our two focus traits. Finally, students were told that they had exactly six days in which to respond. The college students did not want any of the secondary students to be left waiting for a response and were happy to oblige. Once their responses were finished, they were to send a copy to the English teacher in Alaska and a copy to their instructor.

Response to writing: Learning by doing

It was up to the pre-service teachers to decide how they wanted to respond. Some chose to respond in narrative form in the body of their e-mails. Some chose to respond directly on the secondary students' papers. In some cases, the responses were written in different colored font. In other cases, students utilized the "insert/comment" feature of Microsoft Word. When the "insert/comment" feature was used, the secondary student could point their cursor directly to the highlighted text, and a comment would pop up on the screen. Regardless of how the pre-ser-

vice teachers chose to respond, their responses were rich and informative. In one case, a secondary student wrote about the importance of having a good education—and the consequences if you don't! Her college partner enjoyed her paper a great deal, and this is what he had to say in response:

> I really enjoyed reading your paper. You are very gifted at drawing the reader into your story. I liked how you started with an example of being 30 years old, living with your parents and not having a job. This was a great way to grab the attention of your reader. As I read I feel like you are talking to me and that you are really serious about what you are saying. Your voice is very strong! Sentences like "You'd be sitting out in the streets!" woke me up and made me read more closely.

What was appreciated about this part of the student's response was how he commented to a specific aspect of his partner's paper. He commented directly to her strong voice, which is one of the six traits we studied. He went on to comment further about his partner's ideas within her paper:

> I also liked that you told me you want to be a fashion designer. This personal detail helped me understand why you are so committed to education. When you said that you want to graduate and go to college I really believed you because I know that you want to be a fashion designer. I think that you should share even more about your dream of becoming a fashion designer and what kind of education that will require. What kind of fashion design do you want to get into? What type of degree do you need from the school in Long Beach? Can you get a scholarship to go to Long Beach? What kind of grades do you need to get into this school? If you talk about these things it will prove to the reader that the only way to follow your dream is to do well in high school.

By asking his partner leading questions, he challenges her to think even more deeply about her topic, and gives her concrete suggestions to con-

sider when it comes time to revise. Finally, he had this to say about her paper:

> Another thing I like about your paper is the way that you ended by reminding me to put a smile on my face every single day. This is really important because having an education is no use if I don't enjoy life. I think that you can also expand upon this idea of putting a smile on every day. Share with your reader how it is that you are able to be a good student and also put a smile on your face every day. Let the reader know a little more about what makes you a person who loves to smile and share that with others.

> Overall, I think you did a really good job because you convinced me that school is important for you. After reading your paper I am convinced that you truly value school and you want others to see the importance of school. Nice work!

In another example, a secondary student wrote a paper describing snowmobiles. His description of what makes one snowmobile better looking than another, however, fell short. In response, another of the college students replied:

> How are they better looking? It is always good to place yourself outside what you are writing and act like you have no idea what the author is writing about. Can you get a visual picture of what is being said? If not then try to add some descriptive terms to color in the picture for the reader.

In this student's response, he went on to praise his partner's efforts:

> You have a really good start to an essay and should make a couple of minor changes and then have a very good essay. I really enjoyed thinking about snowmobiles again as I have not been on one for about 10 years. Thank you for giving me an excuse to go back in my memory for some really good times.

It was virtually impossible for the pre-service teachers not to connect on a personal level when responding to their partners' papers. Their desire to connect with students and impact them in a positive way was a testament to their dedi-

cation and dispositions to become teachers.

The following example illustrates what the majority of the pre-service teachers did on an unconscious level. They felt that they could not properly respond to their partners without first telling them a little about themselves. In this particular example, two of the pre-service teachers were responding to the same paper. Here is how they chose to introduce themselves:

> My name is Sean. I'm one of two Western Washington University students who had the privilege of reading your paper. I'm 26 years old and from Bellingham, WA. I'm glad to hear that you want to go to college and become a teacher. Like you, I also have brown hair, but mine is really short. If I let my hair grow long it might look funny because it gets really curly.

> And my name is Brian. I am 32 years old. I am a post-baccalaureate student at Western Washington University, studying to be an English teacher so I can have the pleasure of teaching kids like you in the near future. I too, wear glasses. I'm 6' 1", skinny, and have medium-length brown hair. My likes include English Literature, The Beatles, independent films, art, the Daily Show, coffee, watermelon, and Italian food. My dislikes include math, most "reality" TV shows, The New York Yankees, Rush Limbaugh, and eggplant.

Political commentary aside, the college students were eager to share who they are as people with their Alaskan partner. Finally, another pre-service student chose to share this about herself:

> My name is Nickie. I am studying at Western Washington University to become a high school-level science teacher. I am from Chicago, but moved to Washington because of the beautiful mountains, forests, and ocean. I live in Bellingham with 3 roommates, 2 cats, 20 chickens, 2 sheep, and 2 ducks. To make money for school, I sell bouquets of dahlia flowers that grow in my yard by the side of the road. When I'm not selling flowers, I too like to play ball-fastpitch softball, and I like snowboarding.

I think that's cool you're in the Native Youth Olympics!

Once all of the pre-service teachers' responses were sent, they spent part of their next class meeting debriefing on the experience. Some of their comments are included in the following section. They were all very excited to find out that their responses had arrived safely to their respective recipients. That same day, they received an e-mail from the teacher in Alaska:

Lauren- I have forwarded the e-mails to their respective audiences. My students are feeling mighty good about the responses from your students. This is a unique experience for them... they kept rereading their e-mails. I will be teaching writing all year, so I'm game to do this again. I have a few students who have finished their first serious writing piece. Would you be willing to take those on too? I think this is working out so far...

Since WWU is on the quarter system, the students who took this literacy class in the fall were not able to respond to any more of the Alaska students' writing. Due to a slow start on this project, the time simply ran out. Some of the pre-service teachers suggested keeping the project going, since they don't need to physically be in the same classroom to participate. Some suggested that the project continue with the new class of students, suggesting that they would find the experience valuable, too.

Reflections on the project: Becoming a "real" teacher

At the end of the time together in class, students were asked to respond to a brief survey about the e-mail project they participated in with their rural Alaskan partners. When asked whether or not they felt comfortable with using the 6-Trait model, one of them replied, "The 6-Trait is on its way to becoming internalized!" Another student commented, "I did feel comfortable using it, because it provided a much needed framework for evaluation." Another question they responded to was whether or not using the 6-Trait Model of assessment made their job easier or more difficult. Overwhelmingly,

they replied that the model was helpful. One student commented, "I felt like it made my job easier, because it gave me a good way to critique her paper. I feel like I wouldn't have done a good job without it—my comments would have been too general." Similarly, another student wrote, "The 6-Trait Model made my job easier. It gave me specific areas to focus my comments on." This was a widely-cited sentiment regarding the use of the 6-Trait Model. These students appreciated having specific language to use when responding to their partner's papers. This was especially true for the students who are not planning on teaching English.

Another question the college students were asked to think about was how responding to their partner's writing made them feel. Again, the majority said that it made them feel good. One student said, "It made me feel really good, because I will have to respond to my own students' writing someday, and it gave me some practical experience." Another student responded, "Good – I felt like I was helping. I just wanted to make sure not to dampen his voice in the paper." This was a concern for several students. In some cases, they were afraid of being overly critical. Finding a balance was more difficult for some of them than they had anticipated. For example, one student commented, "I tried not to be overly critical, because I didn't want my partner to get discouraged." This is why they were asked to focus only on two traits: ideas/content and organization. However, many students ended up commenting on voice, as well. A couple of students indicated that responding to their partners' writing transported them out of their own culture and into another, more distant culture. One student wrote, "I love to travel. In fact, I'm addicted to it. This project, in a round-about way, felt like traveling to the far North." Another student agreed by saying, "I felt like I was in their culture. The writing was reflective of their personal experience." Thus, without leaving their homes or reading about it in a textbook, the pre-service teachers' perceptions were broadened through the writing of their partners. For many of them, this was the most valuable part of the project. Another comment nicely summarized how participating in this project made these stu-

dents feel: "I felt like a teacher. I hope my comments were helpful."

Next, the students were asked whether or not they would consider doing a project like this in their own classrooms. The future English teachers immediately saw the benefits of connecting students with other students. "Students might be more likely to make suggestions to other students if they aren't face-to-face. I might do this across classes." A future geography teacher saw the obvious potential for a project like this in his class: "We could exchange writing from specific geographic areas that we are studying." A future science teacher was also able to see some exciting potential by stating, "Oh yeah! We could do labs simultaneously with other science classes and send reports back and forth. I think it would work well for group work in my science class (if everyone had access to computers)."

The final question to ponder was whether or not this project, or similar projects, should continue to be a part of their teacher preparation. Again, many felt as though this was a valuable learning experience. One student stated, "It allows us to be teacher-like by helping kids with their work." Another student said, "I liked it, because it gave me a feel for how I will have to respond to my own students someday." For most pre-service teachers, working with "real" student work was what they saw as most beneficial. "I think this project should be continued. The experience of seeing an actual student's work is great for our grading development." One student commented on the cultural benefits of the project: "This project should definitely be continued! It was especially cool because the kids were from Alaska—coming from a very different environment/lifestyle. It would be cool, too, if you got in touch with a class from a different country far away, like Iraq." Clearly, the students saw the possibilities as endless.

CONCLUSION

All teachers, regardless of content area, are expected to be teachers of reading and writing. Many standardized tests (which are more commonly becoming graduation requirements) are not tests of one's ability to solve math problems or recall historical facts, per se, but tests of one's ability to read and write. With this idea weighing heavily on the minds pre-service secondary students, participation in this project was seen as a valuable learning experience. Not only have these students begun to internalize a language with which to talk about writing with their students, but they have also gained valuable practice using this language while working with "real" students on "real" assignments. While they all wished that they had more time to work with this project, they figured that a small amount of exposure was better than no exposure at all. Plus, some interesting side-issues came to light. First, the students did not expect to forge such a personal bond with their Alaskan partners—after all, this was just a single exchange! They wondered how this bond might have been strengthened with even one more chance to connect. This offered a unique insight into their dispositions as future teachers. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) defines teacher disposition, in part, as, "…guided by beliefs and attitudes related to values such as caring, fairness, honesty, responsibility, and social justice" (NCATE, 2002, p. 53). Within the context of this project, the author was able to see these values manifested in her students' connections with their Alaskan partners. Had they not participated in this project, the author would have missed seeing this side of her pre-service teachers.

Another side-issue that came to light as a result of this exchange was the students' interest in the cultural context. The fact that their exchange was virtual (as opposed to face-to-face) took the concept of culture a step further. According to Selfe (1999), "Electronic writing reflects the postmodern condition of contemporary culture" (p. 292). For the purposes of this project, the term "postmodern" can be defined as "…a response to our increased awareness of the great diversity in human cultures" (Selfe, 1999, p. 293). One of the distinctive features of using networked computers in the classroom is their ability to connect students with other, distant students with which to gain multiple perspectives. According to Langston & Batson

(1990), "...respect for multiple perspectives may become increasingly important as electronic media make more ideas and opinions available." What a valuable skill for these pre-service teachers to learn.

Finally, it could be argued that these students learned just as much, if not more, from this single exchange as their Alaskan partners. There was a strong sense of collaboration within and among these students during the project, and research on the benefits of collaborative learning are well-documented. Faigly (1999) contends that, "...most learning is not 'self-taught,' most learning is not a solitary experience... people learn best when learning with other people" (p. 137). Throughout this project, the author acted as merely a guide. The students did the work and made the discoveries—the connections—themselves. The author did her best to stay out of their way. Everyone appreciated that. In the end, one of the students summed it up best when she said,—"I just can't wait to get out there and TEACH!"

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Dr. Lauren McClanahan is an assistant professor in the Department of Secondary Education, Woodring College of Education, Western Washington University, in Bellingham, Washington. E-mail: lauren.mcclanahan@wwu.edu.

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