



A Win-Win Service Learning Project for College Students and First-Grade Children

BY MICHELLE HANEY

Abstract

This study explores a pen pal project in which college students studying human development are matched with first grade students beginning to learn letter-writing skills. Analyses of college student final reports indicate that this project facilitated learning by offering an enjoyable authentic learning experience. Furthermore, teacher reports indicated that the first grade students were highly motivated by the pen pal experience. Recommendations for further developing a pen pal service learning activity are provided.

Keywords:

College students, authentic learning, service learning, child development

Authentic writing experiences are important tools for helping both children (Clay, 1991; Mayer, 2007) and college students (Renzulli, Gentry, & Reis, 2004) personally connect with new skills and concepts. There are many ways to integrate these opportunities into writing instruction. The use of pen pal relationships is one example of an authentic writing activity that allows for skill development over time while also providing natural feedback to engage the child as writer and reader (Barksdale, Watson, & Park, 2007). The effective use of pen pals as an authentic writing experience for beginning young writers has been documented in a number of situations. For instance, research suggests that pen pal relationships of children partnering with senior adults foster meaningful writing opportunities within the context of intergenerational learning. These types of pen pal relationships provide numerous developmental benefits for both the child and the senior pen pal (Bryant, 1989; Kiernan & Mosher-Ashley, 2002). The child benefits from experience writing and internalizing the value of writing within a meaningful context while also developing a relationship with an adult. Relationships with older adults offer living history, stories blended with beloved memories, and dispel cultural myths about the abilities of senior adults in our society. Pen pal relationships offer both the opportunity to mentor and connect to future generations, as well as stimulating activities that may have cognitive benefits.

Examples of successful pen pal projects that provide authentic writing experiences for young writers include international Internet pen pals with children from other countries (Chauhan, J., 1996; Charro, 2007), preservice teachers and children (Moore, 2000), and a pen pal project with children and sailors at sea and soldiers stationed abroad (Chopra, 2005). The ability of these pen pal projects to procure rich learning opportunities for children is explained by socio-cultural developmental theorist, Lev Vygotsky (1978), who describes cognitive development as occurring within a context of culture and social relationships. Thus, a writing activity nestled within the framework of a developing relationship not only provides an interesting and authentic writing opportunity, but may also be the optimal manner in which children come to understand knowledge and culturally valued skills such as communicating through writing.

Pen Pal Project with College Students in Developmental Psychology Course: A win-win learning dynamic

As I planned to teach a course in *Lifespan Development* for the seventh year, I decided to incorporate a service-learning project into the course.

In other classes, my students benefited from experiential projects that provided authentic learning opportunities that were relevant and personally meaningful. However, rather than create another project involving observation and reflection alone, I decided to find a project that incorporated learning with a service immediately relevant and valuable to the population we were intending to "serve." The research in service learning suggests that powerful learning opportunities result from service that is truly valued by those being served (Schmidt & Robby, 2002). In other words, the service experience should not be driven by the need to teach a learning objective. Rather, a rich service learning project is created when services offered are something the agency actually values and needs. Thus, the challenge in crafting a service learning opportunity is to identify what is both a learning opportunity for students, achieves learning objectives for the course, and also fulfills (rather than creates) a need in the community.

At the time I was thinking about this project, my daughter's first grade class was bringing home pretend letters to imaginary audiences. Her teacher was beginning to teach letter writing skills. This is what professionals in education and psychology elegantly identify as an "ah-ha" moment. After securing parental consent, her teacher and I developed a three-month long pen pal project between our respective students. As with other pen pal projects documented in the literature, this project presented a win-win opportunity for both parties involved. Furthermore, the use of intergenerational writing as a learning tool has been underexplored (Katz 1996). A community of writers and readers emerged as my college students paired with my daughter's first grade classmates. The children accessed a meaningful context to learn letter writing. They expressed delight upon receiving a letter and picture from a real college student who expressed interest in learning about them. In addition, they were given carte blanche to ask college students questions about their lives and the college experience. Many of the children had never been on a college campus and were very interested in learning about this much celebrated experience. Thus, an added bonus of this program was that it provided children a concrete example of and a window into considering college as a viable future goal.

The Participants

Twenty children ages 6-7 were invited to participate in this project. Eleven of the participants were girls, and nine were boys. All parents returned the letter (sent home from school with their child) indicating that they

were willing to have their child participate in the pen-pal project. The children only provided first names. College students and children were not given each other's home addresses, phone numbers, or email addresses. One child in the class was bi-racial. The rest of the class was European-American. Thirty-four percent of students attending the school receive free lunches. Eligibility for free lunches at public schools is one index for socio-economic status.

The college participants included 23 sophomore, junior, and senior level students with a variety of majors. The majority of the students were psychology majors. However, 5% of the students were in the pre-nursing program or were hoping to attend medical school after graduation. The course was a 200-level course entitled *Lifespan Development*. Students were told that they could choose to write a term paper in place of the service project if they desired. All 23 students chose to participate in the service project. The first-grade teacher selected three children who were particularly strong in writing and reading to be assigned two pen pals.

The Assignment

At the beginning of the semester, students were asked to write an introductory letter to a first grade student. As a class, we discussed the type of vocabulary, themes, tone, and physical aspect of the letter (i.e., color, print, stickers and drawings, clean paper- no ripped notebook pages) developmentally appropriate for first grade students and for a school activity. I worked with the class to critique examples so we could consider what the literature in developmental psychology says about the preoperational-age child within the context of a letter to an actual child. Students pointed out examples where metaphors were used and how the first grader would likely interpret such phrases literally or not at all. We also discussed issues such as humor and points of common interest that would be developmentally appropriate. At times we struggled with certain themes. For instance, as a class we considered how to address questions from children about sensitive issues such as religious affiliation, incidences of bullying, or other sensitive topics. After consulting with the classroom teacher, we decided that both the classroom teacher and myself would read both the college student's and children's letters to address any sensitive issues that might arise before returning the letters. For instance, there was one child in the class who had recently lost his father to cancer. The college student assigned to him was encouraged to be sensitive to this loss. He was careful about asking

questions about the child's family, but responded honestly and sincerely to questions the child asked about his own family.

After the first batch of letters was sent to the first grade teacher for review, my students waited eagerly for their response letters. In anticipation of the children's letters, my students were eager to discuss issues regarding developmentally appropriate instruction and pedagogy for young children. They had limited understanding of how long it took a first grader to compose a letter that they wrote in less than five minutes. Further, it offered a chance to discuss the difficulty classroom teachers face as they try to integrate creative learning projects such as pen pal letters into rigid test driven curriculum. We also had a chance to discuss the wide range of skill levels in the classroom. The teacher had informed me that it took the children several drafts of working with the teacher to get the letters ready to send. She noted that there were a few first graders in the class who were just beginning to write sentences, and others with more advanced fine motor and vocabulary skills. As a class we compared these interesting anecdotal comments with the research literature in child development and were delighted to find a great deal of empirical support for our observations and teacher comments.

In the course syllabus, the college students were given the details of a final pen pal letter critique. The assignment involved constructing a 2-3 page essay in which they considered aspects of cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development as reflected in the pen pal letters. In addition, they were asked to evaluate changes in cognitive development and writing skill that might be evident over the course of the semester. The Pen Pal Critique Assignment is listed in Appendix A.

Results

At the end of the semester, the college students were asked to write a 1-2 paper reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of this service project. In particular, they were asked to comment on what they learned from the project and how it might be improved in the future. Their responses fell within three primary categories: Personal response (how much they liked or disliked aspects of the project), learning responses (the degree to which they were able to connect the pen pal project with course material), and suggestions for strengthening this project.

In regards to personal responses, the majority of students reported liking the pen pal project. For instance students wrote, "I think the pen pal

assignment was a very interesting idea for the class because I enjoyed writing to Laura"; "I really enjoyed writing the letters to Kayla because it made me think about how I was in first grade and what was important to me."; "Personally, I really enjoyed this assignment and loved communicating with a first grader and finding out what they are interested in."; "I thought the project was a lot of fun and different from other assignments I have done."; "I think it is better to have projects like this because you actually get to experience in real life the changes in development rather than just read it in a book."

However, not all students felt so positive about the assignment. For instance, one student wrote, "Overall, I feel like this project was more work than it was worth. In a day and age where technology has become so inherent, I don't think physically writing a pen pal is quite what it used to be." Another commented that as the course moved on to address development through the lifespan, the assignment focusing on child development seemed less compelling.

The service aspect of the project resonated for some students. For instance, students wrote, "I think the assignment is a useful service to support children learning to write. It is more enjoyable to write letters to a friend than for a grade and they get real life experience while learning to write"; and "There is no better way to teach children to write."

Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Pen Pal Projects

Service learning provides opportunities for individuals to understand new concepts within the context of a meaningful experience. These experiences often provide a high motivation for learning and empower students to be responsible for their learning as they come to understand the valued contributions they are making through the learning experience. From a community perspective, service-learning programs encourage young people to be active members of their communities and provide models for how one might extend learning experiences through creative service in areas of need.

This particular pen pal project provided a meaningful service learning experience for both college students enrolled in a Human Development course, and for first grade students learning how to communicate through writing. The college students understood this project as a means of providing a meaningful context for developing writers to practice letter-writing skills. They also critiqued aspects of child development studied in the course from the letters they received. College

students also had to carefully consider issues such as vocabulary level, developmental interests, and writing style when crafting each letter.

First grade students understood themselves to be providing an important service as well. The elementary school students were told that they would be helping college students learn about children through the pen pal project for a college class. They also understood that the project would be a fun way for them to practice their writing skills. Thus, this was a unique project in that both parties understood themselves to be not only recipients of a service project, but also participants engaged in providing a valued service to others. In this way, project pen pal was an empowering experience of helping others for all parties involved. In addition to a powerful service learning opportunity, this project provides an opportunity to analyze the benefits of pen pal writing to increase learning. As noted by Barksdale, Watson, and Park (2007), "There has been little research on pen pal writing; however, the potential benefits of opportunities for authentic and meaningful writing in support of literacy development are well documented (p. 58)."

Katz (1996) describes a similar teaching exercise in a child development class where college students prepare and exchange written questions with students in a fourth grade class. Katz found from anonymous end of the year course evaluations that college students were enthusiastic about the exercise and found them to be a positive learning experience. Katz notes that this exercise can be done with many different age groups, and this study extends her work by an ongoing pen pal relationship with younger children who are emerging letter writers. Consistent with Katz' s findings, my students reported several trends:

- 1) surprise at the high degree of cognitive and language skills demonstrated by children.
- 2) interest and enlightenment in being able to connect theory from the textbook with real-life experience.
- 3) motivation to learn more about child development.

An added dimension to this learning activity was revealed in the children's letters. The children expressed much delight in writing to and receiving letters from an interested adult. The classroom teachers reported that the children frequently asked when the next batch of letters would arrive and noted that this was one writing assignment that students didn't mind revising because they wanted to look good for the college students.

However, there was much consensus among the college students that a greater amount of time needed to be spent with this project to allow for a meaningful number of letters to evaluate. It is suggested that in future pen pal projects, the professor work with the collaborating elementary teacher several months in advance of the course to set dates for letter writing. An additional recommendation is to provide some way to provide closure to this personal activity. Perhaps arranging for a visit to the school or sending a video to the class would be helpful. The teacher reported that the children expressed the desire to actually meet their pen pals. Overall, this service learning activity allowed for both the college students studying child development and the elementary school children learning letter-writing to have a meaningful context for a learning activity while providing a valuable service to one another. Truly, a win-win situation!

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Send Correspondence to Michelle R. Haney, Department of Psychology, P.O. 5019, Berry College, Mount Berry Georgia, 30149-5019, email: mhaney@berry.edu. Phone: 706-290-2660. Fax: 706-368-6971

Michelle R. Haney is an Associate Professor of Psychology at Berry College in Mount Berry, Georgia.

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Appendix A Critique of Pen Pal Letters Assignment

In an essay of 2-3 double spaced pages, address the following:

1) Consider the chapters on preoperational (early childhood) and concrete operational (middle

childhood) cognitive development. How does the content, writing style, choice of vocabulary, and topic, reflect the stage of development of your pen pal? Does your pen pal demonstrate egocentrism or intuitive reasoning? Consider the interests he or she writes about, concerns he or she may have, and things he or she especially likes. Note anything suggesting some more advanced types of thinking (abstract ideas or complex thinking.)

2) Consider the language skills of a child of this age. Describe the vocabulary your child uses. To what extent does this reflect socio-cultural background, school quality, and individual differences? How does the child's beginning writing skills impact his or her ability to express him/her self? Did you note spelling, grammar errors? Consider the penmanship? What might this tell you about your pen pal's visual-spatial skills, fine motor skills, and motivation to communicate through writing?

3) Have you noticed

a) any changes over the course of the semester in the quality of your pen pal's writing?

b) any distinct themes in the things your pen pal chooses to write about?

4) What have you learned about your pen pal's social and emotional development? Consider his or her descriptions of themselves and his or her friends (and the research in the text about sense of self at this age). Does the child write about abstract personality traits or more concrete interests? Did you gain an understanding about specific things in his or her life that is important to the child (i.e., certain events, people, experiences, goals?) You may consider drawings too if they sent you some.

5) Please let me know what you thought of this assignment. Did it complement what we were doing in class? Did you perceive this as a useful service to support children learning to write? Did you learn (and if so what...) anything from this? Did it add to your understanding of skill/cognitive levels of children at this age?

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