

Susan Reed

London Calling

"London?"

"Who?"

I had their attention. My Period 6 students were going to write to students in London all year long as part of a project of the Center for the Study of Writing at U.C. Berkeley: a U.S.-U.K. audience exchange project involving a handful of Bay Area classes and London area classes. Researchers would study student writing in both settings. My ninth graders at De Anza High School in Richmond, California, would write to a fourth form class at Gladesmore School in Tottenham, London.

Who are my students? Urban kids of many colors in a school where racial and ethnic minorities make a majority. They are 14, 15, and 16 year olds (some have taken and failed English 1 before). Many have attendance problems, especially in classes after lunch. Some come in from out back where, at lunch, the stoners live. Some have been mainstreamed from E.S.L. classes. Some are special education students who are mainstreamed to this basic English class. All of these students are swimmers in the pool of low stanine kids we teach in tracked sections in my district.

They were wary right from the start when I passed out the University of California parental permission forms. They needed a signature to be human subjects of a research study. "Human subject? Study *my* writing?"

Researchers, including Sarah Freedman from U.C. Berkeley ("that Sarah girl," as one of my students referred to her in her log) and Alex McLeod from the University of London, were in the room often enough to keep the students aware of their human subject status. Students were observed, interviewed and taped. Other visitors dropped by, including a reporter and photographer from the local newspaper.

But as my class began to exchange writing with the U.K. class, they began to perceive themselves as having a job to do. I mean, they had an audience over there of real kids who needed straightening out on quite a few things, like the "in" musical groups in the U.S. and the number of TV channels most of us receive. For some reason students over there believed that we Americans received only four channels. My students wrote about jammed lockers and short lunch periods at De Anza. They explained what it means to graduate from an American high school. They described Bay Area attractions such as the streets of Berkeley, the Santa Cruz Boardwalk, and the San Pablo Reservoir. They shared experiences: what it is like to live with an alcoholic father, what it feels like to run away from home and to come home again. Life's ups and downs. They got involved and they had something to say.

Early in the year, working in groups was a new idea for most of them, accustomed as they were to solo and remedial drill work. Any social activity was associated in their minds with losing points. The class began getting regular help in running response groups from the Write Team, a group of peer writing coaches we have at De Anza. These coaches gave the writers positive feedback on "how it sounds" rather than "what you should fix." These coaches helped them get used to working

continued on next page

London Calling

continued from previous page

together and to writing for an audience besides their teacher. Talking became necessary rather than subversive; revising became something more than recopying.

A general spirit of comradery developed in the room. I noted in my own log as early as November, "Never have I had a class like this one that lingers over what the bell just ended. They left the room still talking about their writing."

My role in the classroom began to change early in the year. I wasn't chief evaluator any more; I was a coach. This class wasn't writing to my assignments for a grade I gave them. Instead, I was coaching them to write for a real audience outside the classroom. I took roll, gave credit for drafts and finished pieces, talked with students about their drafts. I provided them with models of different kinds of writing they might try and helped them find proofreaders for one another's work (resisting the urge to take over their pieces and "fix" them myself so that London wouldn't see any deficiencies).

The atmosphere in the room changed so dramatically that the contracts I had always used in low stanine classes became an embarrassment to me. Assigning points for such behavior as bringing a pencil or having a positive attitude or working attentively all period just became irrelevant and insulting.

I even stopped putting grades on individual finished pieces of writing and nobody seemed to notice. As long as I kept giving credit for process and conferring regularly with them about how their work was going, grades on final products were unimportant; finishing a piece and mailing it off was what mattered. Getting a response didn't even seem to be essential since their interest survived a long silence from England during a teachers' strike at Gladesmore.

Aside from the computer hook-up between De Anza and Gladesmore, the formal exchange of writing is over this year; grant monies have run out; data need to be studied and published. What have I learned from the experience of being a teacher involved in this study?

I've learned collaboration between a university and a public high school is a gift to the teachers and to the students involved. As the university researchers gathered information about the audience exchange, we benefitted. No question. The exchange project was the key to changing roles in my classroom. My students wrote to a real audience, and I had the chance to be a learner in their midst rather than a teacher in front.

I feel so strongly about what we accomplished together last year that I asked to keep the same group of students again for another year. Most of my students, except for those who were repeaters, are back again this year in English 2. They are no longer tracked as basic or remedial or low stanine this year. Last year's exchange group has been joined this year by several students who have never been labelled "underachieving" as well as by three more mainstreamed special ed students; the course now is a regular English 2 section—actually 2p (for general college prep). Now, at least, students wishing to apply to college will receive English credit for the course, not the case for the low stanine courses. Because of the way the class now runs—as a writing workshop—I offer help as needed and work with each student to set individual goals for the course.

This year, with the structure for the exchange already set in place, we'll ask more questions ourselves, take a closer look at what is happening in our own room.

I've collected evidence of what I've always known: people rise to what is expected of them. Rather than follow my students around with talk of making up their deficiencies and their mistakes and their missing assignments, I know I can give them something real to do—like tell somebody else what they think about their world. This year we will continue to exchange computer messages with Gladesmore. Also, without University support, we will write to students in another London class at Morpeth School in Bethnal Green. My students can keep folders of their own finished work—photocopies of writing actually sent to somebody along with collections of notes and drafts that led to that writing. They can see for themselves what they've done and celebrate it.

I know that this year my students and I will keep changing and looking at the changes. Instead of collecting data for somebody else to consider and evaluate later, we will be "learner-researchers" ourselves, not human subjects. Why miss an opportunity to learn more about our own learning? The researcher role suits my students. They all kept London logs last year so they learned to reflect on what was happening in their own writing. They were also able to make some rather astute observations about the exchange writing. One time we received what seemed to be a classroom assignment: some impersonal descriptions of Tottenham landmarks with accompanying photographs. Several of my students asked, "Why aren't they writing to us?" "Who are these for?"

This year, with the structure for the exchange already set in place, we'll ask more questions ourselves, take a closer look at what is happening in our own room. Active learning is what people call it these days. How do models help with

writing? How do response partners help with revision? How are we changing as writers? I can tackle questions like these in my own log and do my own teacher research. My students can address the same issues in their logs and in self-evaluations as they finish final drafts and as they come to the end of each quarter.

Thinking about Period 6 reminds me of a little Robert Frost poem:

We dance round in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

After a year of sitting among my students in the middle of my classroom as a research participant and as a coach, I'm beginning to know that the secret *is* sitting in the middle after all.