

Real Voices for Real Audiences

For all of my work with response groups and my notes about "Show don't tell" and "Please be more specific" and "Why did the boy make you afraid?" I had met with little success in getting my students to develop their ideas thoroughly, to describe characters and events fully, to explain their feelings exactly—in short, to write with a sense of audience. Occasionally their personal narratives would come alive with colorful detail, but for the most part they wrote not for an interested reader but for a mistake-finder who red-pencilled misspelled words, concentrated on penmanship and punctuation, and checked off assignments. Because of that perception of the teacher-as-audience, my students played it safe: they wrote as little as possible and as neatly as they could; they concerned themselves with correct headings, length of paper, and titles; and they wrote what they thought I wanted them to say. When Sarah Freedman asked me to join her audience exchange project, I saw opportunities for changing my students' perception of audience as well as for getting to know a group of students in a foreign country.

For the project I asked my students to do a focused free writing on what they knew about England and how they felt about writing to students there, hoping that writing would weaken their resistance and get them involved. They knew that "England is a country in Europe" (Oben) [all student names are the pseudonyms that they chose to use for the exchange] "whose citizens speak the same language as us" (Geya) but who "drive on the opposite side of the road" (Run). They also knew that "England is a very pretty place to see and famous for their Big Ben" (Ice T); that "Every year two of our NFL football teams go to England and they have a big game and they love it" (Easy E); and that "Boy George is from London" (Rex). As far as their feelings about making contact with English students, they were mostly hesitant: "I feel like I'm being forced to write to them" (Ice T); "I can't really say how I feel about writing ... because I don't know them and I never saw them before" (Rex); "I don't feel excited because I don't really want them to know a lot about me" (Elaine); "I guess I feel good about it. I just wouldn't tell a person who I don't know anything personal" (Cool J).

Not entirely trustful of the exchange project, not knowing the British students, and being especially careful of their handwriting and spelling, the students in my class wrote letters that were for the most part stiff, brief, and formulaic: "My name is Bill. I am 17 years old. This is my third year of high school. I play no sports at this school. In my spare time I like to go to parties, concerts, and bowling. My hobbies are trains"; "My name is Elaine Jackson. I am fourteen years old. I was born June 19, 1973, at Martinez Hospital. I have one brother and two sisters. My brother's name

is Edward. My sisters' names are Stacey and Susan"; "Hi. My name is Rex. I am 15 years of age and I go to El Cerrito High School in the State of California."

When the first letters arrived from England, the excitement began. We read the letters at the first of the period and suggested that since there weren't enough letters to go around, those who got a letter should read it silently first and then aloud to the class. I handed out the letters randomly. "Here's one from Louise. Who wants to read it?" "Garney?" "Marthy?" "Here's one from someone named Titch—look at her pretty writing." Run wanted that letter, artistic with its brown ink and large calligraphic letters. As he read, he began to smile and then to share his letter with the students around him. With that letter, the success of the exchange was born. Titch's voice shouted out—"Hi to all you funky def people in 9th grade, it's Titch"—and took control of not just Run's but a number of other boys' hearts in Room 606 as well.

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Titch was not the only Burlington-Danes student my students felt they knew after the first letter. There were others—like Marisa who had an unkind word to say about everyone in her class and Garney who wrote moving descriptions of her family and her religion and Ream who LOVED American television shows, looked just like BRUCE WILLIS, and used three exclamation marks and four capitalized words per sentence. There were Louise and Tootsie and Ahmed. These were the students my students talked about and whose letters they read and reread on the bulletin board. These were the students my students wanted to emulate, even to the point of using their language—"mum," "maths," and "tuck" and other Britishisms they had picked up from movies and television comedy routines. These were the students who were real to my students and me, real because we could hear their voices in their writing.

A few days later when we started work on our first official exchange paper there was no resistance. After

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discussing general topics to include in an autobiography, my students went to the computers and began composing.

One problem I had with the autobiography assignment was that my students had a hard time addressing a general audience. When they did not feel that their autobiography-writing voices allowed them to speak to the Burlington-Danes students effectively, they switched to their letter-writing voices. "We stay in Easter Hill but, as I told you awhile back, I stay with my grandmother because she is afraid" (Short T). "Now let me tell you a little about what I like to do on weekends and when we don't have school" (Elaine). "I really enjoy going to El Cerrito High School. But sometimes it can be a real p— in the a—. You know what I was going to say" (Rex).

At first I was frustrated with their switch from addressing a general audience to a specific audience but decided that if I insisted that they stop speaking directly to the students in England or to one student in particular, I would be interfering with their developing awareness of voice, so I stepped back.

Over the course of the year my students sent more writing than they received. Occasionally they complained about the imbalance—"I waited for you guys to write us back, but you never did so I decided to write to you"—but for the most part, they accepted the fact that they were sending more pieces and writing longer pieces than the British students. The disparity in frequency and length did not dampen my students' interest in the exchange project. Once their initial reticence had disappeared, they wrote openly and enthusiastically to their British counterparts. In her April 19th letter, Geya wrote, "I was sitting in my classroom wondering when your class was going to write again. I was hoping to get a letter or something... I guess I will start by telling you about my school life. Everyone at school that knows me says I'm a nerd. The reason for that is because I like to write. Whenever I'm supposed to write a paragraph I don't; I write a page. Everyone tells me that I wrote a book and that really makes me angry." Although my students loved reading the work of the British students and getting to know them through their writing, they did not look upon the exchange as a dialogue. They talked about the British writers and discussed their personalities and writings, but never once initiated writing a response to a particular piece of writing. My students viewed the exchange as a performance opportunity for which the British students served as audience, an audience that was to be courted and moved and entertained.

This summer as I reread my students' papers I was moved by two significant changes in their writing, changes that I think are directly attributable to our participation in the audience

exchange project: their writing became longer and more detailed and it took on a clear personal voice.

As the year went along my students stopped playing it safe with short, perfunctory essays that filled space but revealed little about what they knew and felt. Gone, for example, were Cool J's skeletal paragraphs filled with unelaborated statements. In the first weeks of the school year he wrote, "I am 14 years old. I was born at Kaiser Permanente in Oakland, California. I live with both my parents. My father is a minister." In his autobiography, directed toward his British audience, he wrote, "My brother's name is Carter Lee Freeman. He got his middle name from my father. My brother is 22 years old. He is the best basketball player in the world. He is a senior at Sacramento State University and the starting guard on the basketball team. I hope he is good enough to play pro-basketball. I think he is, but I am not a pro coach."

Over the course of the year their personal narratives doubled in length. On September 14, Geya wrote a personal narrative, "Getting Even," of 176 words. In February her personal narrative on an impetuous deed was 473 words long. The first story Ice T wrote contained 140 words and nine paragraphs—one sentence per paragraph. His February personal narrative had 224 words and two well-developed paragraphs.

My students also responded in detail to the Burlington-Danes students' essays on serious topics such as abortion and arranged marriages. One British student's paper on cocaine elicited page-long reactions from several of my students who shared their concerns as well as their experiences with drugs.

The more they wrote the more comfortable they became in letting their personalities come through in their work. Several students took on nicknames and wrote rap songs for the students in England. Run went from "Hi. My name is Run. I am 15 years old," to "When I was born I was def as can be/ I was like a person on Dynasty/ Soon I reached my first day of school/ And all sucker kids I did rule/ Years flew by I began to grow/ To the fresh young rapper that you now know..."

Their narratives, too, began to have a personal voice. "One day while playing strike-out with my cousin Worm, I broke a window. This is how it happened. We were playing in the church parking lot which is shaped like a square or a box. There is a house right in back of the lot where we bat. And it just so happened that a window is right behind the fence. We had played there over a hundred times and never had any problem. Until that day..."

And eventually their expository writing took on a personal voice. In an essay on the effects of drugs on society, B-Y, for example, referred to an article he had read about a drug-related crime in the local community, interweaving a narrative account of this crime into his exposition: "I read in the newspaper a few months back about a lady who was pregnant

with twins. She gave birth to one and left it in the toilet wrapped up in paper towels, and she went into the front room to finish smoking coke. Then she went into the bathroom again to give birth to the other baby. After she gave birth, she left it on the bathroom floor. She didn't call the police or ambulance until she started losing consciousness. When the police got there the babies were dead. The mother was taken to the hospital and when she was well she was taken to jail. That is a damned shame."

In the beginning my students thought of the British students as a group of critical readers, much like the teachers they had been writing for. Easy E spoke for the class when he wrote, "When Mrs. Cone first told the class that we would be writing to kids in England I didn't really care. I just thought Mrs. Cone was making up another assignment but I was wrong." When my students read Titch and her classmates' letters of

introduction, they met a new kind of audience, a group of readers who spoke in a lively language and who wanted to get acquainted with them through writing. The Burlington-Danes audience provided my students with a performance opportunity they had not met before in school writing. Once they saw that writing could provide a stage for them to perform on, that writing made them like actors showing off—showing off their ideas and their experiences and their language—they changed. They began with their letter voices but as the year went along they broadened their range, handling narrative voice and exposition. And they used their voices to engage their audience, to make their readers understand their favorite holidays, their impetuosity, their playfulness, their history, their literary perceptions, their hurts, their romances, their joy at improving as writers this year. The Burlington-Danes students heard them and applauded. So did I.