Many expressed fears about being humiliated by the fact that the American students might find what they had to say laughable. There was an initial reaction from both classes that they had to prove their worth. Veronica wrote in response to the question, “How does this writing compare with other writing that you do in school? It would have more detail in the American students’ work because they live in a different state to us so we try to impress them by writing neater and with more effect into our work.”

Receiving the first pieces of work caused many sighs of relief as my students saw that the work was sent by ordinary children. Not special. Not mini-teachers, but individuals writing about their lives in similar ways …

It was now important to be understood. Now there was a real reason to explain things properly and to use the detail required for “effective” communication. This ranged widely from long class projects to informal letters and the more formalized “response” letters which I set up after the class had received much of the Americans’ writing. These included personal descriptions of childhood accidents, hairstyles, knowledge about car mechanics, and so on. Aspects of their lives which mattered to them. For Christos, “getting the explanation right” created two pages of writing on A4 paper which described how to play cricket (a creditable attempt which I understood). The classes were genuinely interested in each other and through their writing they were able to build up an informative dialogue. The clarity and style of writing was thus rendered important because it was their only method of communication.

The need to “perform” had been transformed from an outside pressure to “measure up” to a personal desire to involve, interest, inform, entertain, manipulate and “move.” For example, Daniel wanted to … make them afraid (in his description of a Russian satellite which was apparently out of control) … of what was happening and where it might land.

For others the sheer pleasure of being able to utilize their “expertise” in telling others about their interests was an
The developing “friendships” meant that as the year progressed the students demanded more say in what was written. They realized that they were the experts in deciding what their audience might like to read.

Street again, not even for a million dollars, but if that was me I do it for half a million dollars. A shy student who hardly ever speaks to the girls in his class, he finds courage through writing to be quite personal with a girl he’s never met. At the end of his response letter he writes, I can see that you like hearts a very lot because you got hearts on you at the front of your Autobiography and you were wearing a heart jumper and on your response letter at the top.

The students responded carefully to the details which struck them as particularly interesting. Farah was very clear about what she liked about Andy’s story. We got your spooky tales stories and I found yours good. At least in the end Cindy, Brenda and Liz didn’t get killed, like in some of the stories my friends got! ... I liked the way Brenda turned out not to be such a scaredy-cat after all. And they turned that old man over to the cops. Whilst James was particularly struck by the luxury of having a whole house to yourself on a Sunday morning. I like the most ... your typical Sunday with your mum and dad waking up at 1:00 p.m. and you having the house to yourself would be nice for me. But my mum and dad get up at 9:00 a.m. then my brother who is 3 years older than me gets up at 8:00 a.m. so I never have the house for myself, so I go out with my brother for a game of snooker.

In my journal I noted that The letters were very friendly, they’ve really got the idea of being a sympathetic audience, e.g. Attila, ’I’ll try not to be insulting—I’ll try and put it a better way.’ The letters are relaxed and they are responding very much as if they were their friends.

We had discussed as a class the importance of being sympathetic to each other’s work and about how you can help to build confidence. In fact many of the students had begun to work much more collaboratively, helping one another with drafting and ideas, and they appreciated the value of this. These letters reveal their sensitivity to the other students as learners. They had connected their own feelings of insecurity about writing outside themselves to realize that others might feel the same way too. They had received letters where the students had been enthusiastic about their work, responding positively to what they had written, and they had understood the importance of that support and encouragement for themselves. Jane writes openly about what she was trying to do in her response letter. In my responses ... I was trying to help by
saying how interesting it was. How much I enjoyed reading it. I think I made Kitty more confident about writing and drawing because I don’t think she was too sure. To be quite honest I wasn’t really sure of what I was writing but Kitty made me feel really confident about my work.

I feel that my students’ progress as developing writers went hand-in-hand with a developing confidence in themselves as individuals who had something to say. Far from finding humiliation and rejection from their audience, they found encouragement and acceptance. In return they offered similar nurturing. All this is a far cry from the usual red-inked corrective treatment of students’ writing.

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