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Ignatian Pedagogy Certificate Final Written Project: The Five Domains in Epistolary Form

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Alyson Paige Warren

In January of 2018, an educator (who will herein remain anonymous) reached out to the Loyola University Chicago English department faculty to propose a letter-writing partnership between her high school senior students and some freshmen students at Loyola University Chicago. This teacher wrote that she was inspired by the work chronicled in *P.S. You Sound Like Someone I Could Trust*. This text recorded a project started by the non-profit service 826CHI, pairing eighth and tenth graders as pen pals across the city. (826CHI) She was "...teaching two classes of senior English with *very* reluctant writers..." who she was "...trying to prepare...for their transition to college." Said educator wrote that she was "...drawn to the possibilities for authentic writing, sharing diverse perspectives, and reflecting on education and writing." (Salus) I was drawn to this as well, and thus responded to this teacher, volunteering up my (primarily freshmen) UCWR110 and UCLR100 students for this opportunity.

The educator who was the genesis of this project currently teaching English at the Chicago Math and Science Academy, a Level 1+ charter middle and high school in the Rodger's Park neighborhood. Of the 606 students at CMSA, 94% qualify for free or reduced lunch, 31% are proficient in reading and 26% are proficient in math. (Niche, 2018). In our email exchanges, Salus expressed that her "...hope [was] that the students would be able to discuss what it's like to begin college, what college writing is like, their current goals/frustrations/hopes, and their lives in general." (Anon.)

The teacher and I began the project by setting up an "interest inquiry", i.e.: a general questionnaire for the Loyola University Chicago students that asked about their favorite hobbies;

tastes in music, movies and food; what they liked and disliked about school; their major and how they felt about writing in general. Said educator then used this information to pair her students with my freshmen based on similar preferences and viewpoints. Some Loyola University Chicago students were given two high school pen pals (who tended to have attendance issues) to even out the numbers, and care was taken to place one of the teacher's special needs students with an education major who could most effectively communicate with him and best ballast his inclusion as well.

For our first letters, I prompted my students to share roughly three things they wish they had known before they went to college with their new pen pals. This could range from practical advice to insider tips and tricks, et. all. I also informed them to be as informal, honest and vulnerable as they were willing to be from the outset. We engaged in a brief discussion of the long tradition of letter writing between lovers, artists, family members, etc. We questioned how letter writing differed from texting or emailing, and how the physical object of a letter – which I encouraged them to handwrite – and the process of sending and receiving it effected its impact. My classroom communities seemed overall eager and curious to participate in this exchange, and expressed a sense of pride at being able to engage in mentorship as an act of service.

I gave very little context to my students about the high school seniors to whom they were writing in hopes that this lack of pre-prescribed background would encourage them to seek out the more authentic and empathetic context key to the Ignatian paradigm. I hoped that by omitting my own descriptions of these students that my co-learners would seek to know who these high school seniors uniquely were, rather than who they had been generalized to be.

Our first letters went out at the end of February, with only minor difficulties in the collection process. I did assign a minor grade value to each letter to encourage the students to meet the deadlines assigned, but I tried to stress an intrinsic sense of accountability to their partner as their driving motivation, rather than an extrinsic grade reward or penalty. I emailed the teacher I was working with the letters of any students who failed to get their submissions to me before I sent them en mass through the mail.

As I read each piece, I was pleased how students drew upon their own experiences in a way that did make them "...relevant and applicable to a wider, deeper context." (sakai.luc.edu: *IP Basics*) Many students thoughtfully deconstructed their own pre-conceptions of college experiences and/or challenges. They were thoughtful and vulnerable in their selection and expression of their advice and displayed a high emotional intelligence in how they communicated with their students overall. Many also quickly bypassed surface conversations in a heartening way that I hoped would set a tone for meaningful replies.

When we received our replies from the high school seniors in mid-March, many of my students poured eagerly over their letters the instant they picked them up. They were amused by the SMSA student's candor and life experiences. The replies forced many to consider their own positions of socio-economic, racial and ethnic privilege, and yet they were also able to find many points of connection between not just themselves and their pen pals now, but between their pen pals and their past high school selves as well. This provided a teachable moment of reflection and evaluation on how much they had (or, in some cases, had not) grown since their senior year in high school that I didn't anticipate, but was one of the most beneficial outcomes of the partnership overall.

All in all, we were able to send (and receive) another letter in early April, and then sent out our last letters at the end of April. Many Loyola University Chicago scholars offered up their emails to their pen pals so the two could keep in touch. I wish we had been able to accelerate the collection process at both schools, and speed up the postal service as well. I am glad that we chose to stick to “snail mail” as much as possible, however, as the impression made by the physical objects was one of the most meaningful parts of this experience. Ideally, I would have also liked for the students to meet at the end of the semester, or at least video chat and/or speak to one another over the phone. However, I also think the overall anonymity of the project had its benefits, such as the increased tendency to expose oneself more and more quickly to a stranger to whom one thinks they will never see. If I have the opportunity to take part in a process like this again, I will work to address the above issues as best as possible. However, even in this first attempt, the positives far outweighed the drawbacks.

This act of service had wonderful and important outcomes for both classroom communities. I am eager to de-brief with my co-educator about her overall impressions of the project after her students receive our final letters. I hope she and I will have the opportunity to work on a project like this again, perhaps even next semester. I am also very interested to see how, if at all, the students reflect upon and share their experience of this partnership in the end of semester reflection pieces and in their evaluations of the courses overall. Throughout the process, many students shared how much they enjoyed and were enriched by the letter exchange, and what the practice of service and mentorship meant to them.

In my own reflection process, I hope to be able to capitalize on the best practices that sprung from this opportunity and employ them in my pedagogical approaches and practicum overall. I can say that, in my life, I have found myself taking more care in the emails and texts

that I write to others, and trying to mindfully let the slow thinking and delightful anticipation of the epistolary process change my day to day communications with colleagues, friends, family and especially students for the better.

Works Cited

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