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# Writing across Institutional Boundaries: A K-12 and University Collaboration

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# Writing across Institutional Boundaries: A K-12 and University Collaboration

Rebecca Randolph, Sarah Robbins, and Anne Ruggles Gere

Dear Julie,

I am glad to know that you read science fiction and fantasy as a middle schooler. I like *Watership Down* by Richard Adams. It's about rabbits who leave their warren and go on a journey to find a new one. When I'm not reading I enjoy role-playing and trail blazing, even though I spend most of my time doing school-work.

I am not crazy about sports but I do enjoy cross-country skiing, downhill skiing, tennis and soccer, in that order. My favorite television shows are Star Trek, Star Trek the Next Generation, MacGyver, and Firepower.

My favorite animals are horses and iguanas. Please write back soon.

Sincerely,  
Adam

To Bill:

I enjoy reading horror books, the grosser and scarier the better (blood and guts). Mostly I enjoy reading short stories. A while ago I read a book called Short and Shivery. It was OK. My favorite book was called the Nightmare People, with people made out of clay like substance, and the way to kill them was eat their heart. It was pretty weird, but it was exciting. I hate reading stupid books like I have to read in english class. Last year my teacher would give a choice of several books (I'd pick the horror one.) This year we read the same things, we read Tom Sawyer (wow!!) it was boring, I didn't even read half of it and when the test came I faked it. I still did OK though. I like writing horror story's also. I hate when they give us a dumb topic.

Tom

These letters were the first received by University of Michigan pre-student teachers who were about to embark on a collaborative reading and writing project with eighth graders from the Valley

School, a K-12 alternative school in Flint, about an hour away from the Ann Arbor campus. The English-education students had first written to their middle-school counterparts. Those introductory letters had invited the students to describe their own interests and to make suggestions for a new book they'd like to read with their mentor. Throughout the semester-long project, the students in the university methods course would correspond with a pair of secondary-school students, inviting them to respond to informal writing prompts based on the shared readings selected together.

A major goal of this pilot project was to let pre-certification students begin to experience the "teacher" role with students from the "real world" so that conversations in the methods course, about planning and implementing instruction, would have immediate application. At the same time, we hoped the middle schoolers would benefit from having a new audience to write for, and a different kind of companion to read with, other than their regular classroom teacher. All in all, we imagined this shared learning opportunity would be exciting for the collaborators from both sites, partly because we thought it would be free from some constraints typically associated with more hierarchical teacher/student relationships. Along those lines, we thought the project's somewhat unusual teaching "location" itself might have a positive impact since most of the exchanges were actually to take place not in person but via electronic mail where such hierarchy-imposing factors as age would be invisible. We hoped that working hard to communicate with students as individuals would also encourage the methods-course students to try a

variety of ways to assess reading and writing. In addition, by emphasizing to middle-school students that their university reading/writing mentors were *learning* to be educators, we encouraged the eighth graders to make suggestions about how their collaborators could become better teachers. The younger students enthusiastically embraced this chance to help “teach teachers.”

As the letters above suggest, K-12 students who participated in our project during its pilot year were initially enthusiastic about choosing their own books to read with their college mentors. And some of the choices seemed inspired. Julie’s exchanges with Adam and his reading partner lead to their selection of *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), which Adam reaffirmed in a note to her just after receiving his copy:

This assignment looks like it will be fun. It sounds like the environment is similar to *The Lord of the Rings*, my absolute favorite trilogy. Also, Ged’s description on the back cover reminds me of Cabe Bedlam in *Fire Darkness* by Richard A. Knaak.

Both of Julie’s collaborators enjoyed her choice so much that they completed it and moved on to two more of Ursula LeGuin’s texts before others in the class had finished their first novel. In addition, they found the writing prompts she suggested so much fun that, on most occasions when Julie provided a range of several possible writing tasks, Adam and his partner attempted all of the options, then asked for more. Realizing she’d tapped into an energetic call for curricular enrichment, Julie sought ways to challenge these eager learners without pushing too hard. Below, for example, is one note she sent midway through the project:

Adam and Jim—

OK. So you want more to do. If you have time, feel free to do more than one of these. All that you need to do is one, however. Feel free to choose whichever assignment appeals to you the most.

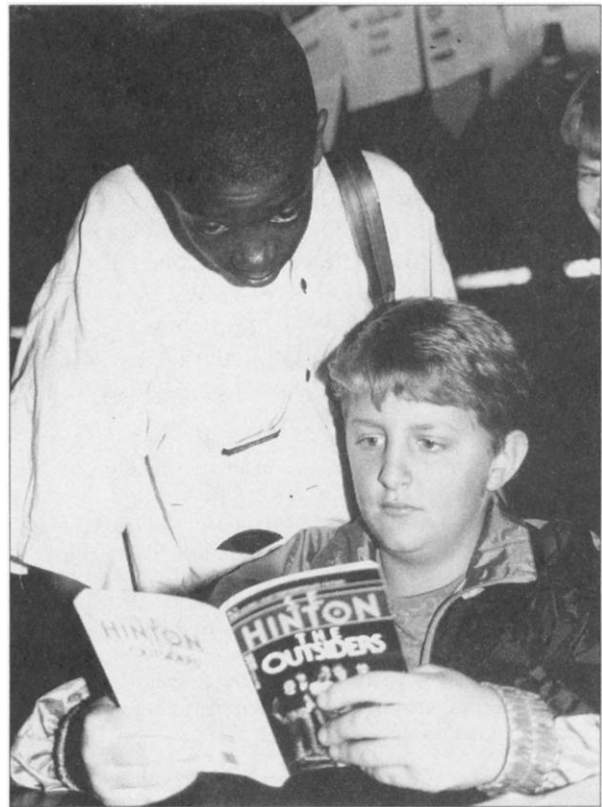
1. There has never been a song written about Ged’s encounter with his shadow. Write that song.
2. Read the short story “The Rule of Names” from Ursula LeGuin’s, *The Wind’s Twelve Quarters* (1975). The story was one of LeGuin’s first writings about Earthsea. See what similarities and differences you can find between the story and the trilogy. Tell me which (story or trilogy) you feel is better and why.
3. Choose any one subject from the Earthsea trilogy. It could be magic, naming, dragons, Gont, Roke, Ged, growing up, etc. Anything at all that interests you. Make a list of all the things you can think

of that relate to your subject. Then write a paragraph or so, telling me about your subject and why it is important to the trilogy.

4. Do this only after you have read all three books: Compare the similarities and differences among the three young characters (Ged, Tenar, Arren). How are the conflicts that they face different? Is there any importance to the fact that Tenar is female?

While Jim chose two of these suggestions, Adam tried out three, writing most extensively on #4. Below is his response to #3, along with Julie’s reply.

Naming is one of the essential parts of the essences of the world of Earthsea. Their world was created by Segoy with one word and will end with a final word. A person’s very being is in their name which is given to them at their coming of age. It is also an essential part of magic as Ged, aka Guny said, “to weave the magic of a thing, you see, one must find its true name.” There is great power and danger in knowing a name and a person may often tell no more than 2 people his name. All wizards are in essence namers, like Kurren Isanmerruk, finding a name, then using it. Not only people have names either: from the Dragon of Pendo—Yeuaud—to an ordinary rabbit—kebbo. Naming could even be called the basis for Earthsea.



Adam—

Good job! I like your use of examples and quotations to support your argument. What about Tenar's name, or Ged's naming of his shadow? How do they play into the idea of naming?

By quickly accepting Julie as teacher, and asking again and again for school-like writing tasks, these students shaped their shared writing experience into an opportunity for expanding their learning. Among the methods students, meanwhile, the question of how they could meet the special needs of a course's eagerest learner once they had a whole classroom of students to serve became another regular topic of discussion.

Other choices were not negotiated as smoothly and productively. One university student, for instance, selected Edith Nesbit's *Enchanted Castle* (1964) for the two boys she was mentoring, and they found the romance focus of the book unappealing. Though discouraged at first, Susan shared her frustrations with her university class members, vowing to "read the whole book" before making a text selection for K-12 students in the future. In the meantime, she tried to turn her misstep into a learning opportunity, explaining in one computer message to us that she did not want "to change the book choice, but learn how to make it more accessible" for her students. The writing tasks she assigned, then, emphasized the journey theme in the novel, as when she asked them to narrate their own imaginary journey with a group of friends. Through this new focus, her students became more enthusiastic about completing the text, though they continued to tease Susan occasionally about her "mushy" choice. Thus, part of Steve's informal response to her request that he speculate about how he would have handled some of the challenges faced by the book's characters included a wide range of useful information for Susan in her learning-to-teach role:

If I were in the same situation as the kids in *The Enchanted Castle*, I'm not sure what I would do. . . . I don't think I would have noticed the string and thimble that they found. But if I did see the string and followed it, I wouldn't have suspected that what was happening was from "Sleeping Beauty." I also don't think I would have kissed some lady I had never met before. The author uses "enchanted" very well—right when they are in the enchanted garden you get a sense, from what the characters say, that something magical is taking place.

If Steve's comment about kissing reminded Susan that he was still resisting some elements in

the text, his apt references to specific plot details and his analysis of some "enchanted" elements in the story showed he was reading along, nonetheless. Further, the university class's discussions about gender and text/assignment selection were enriched with an example from Susan's own teaching experience.

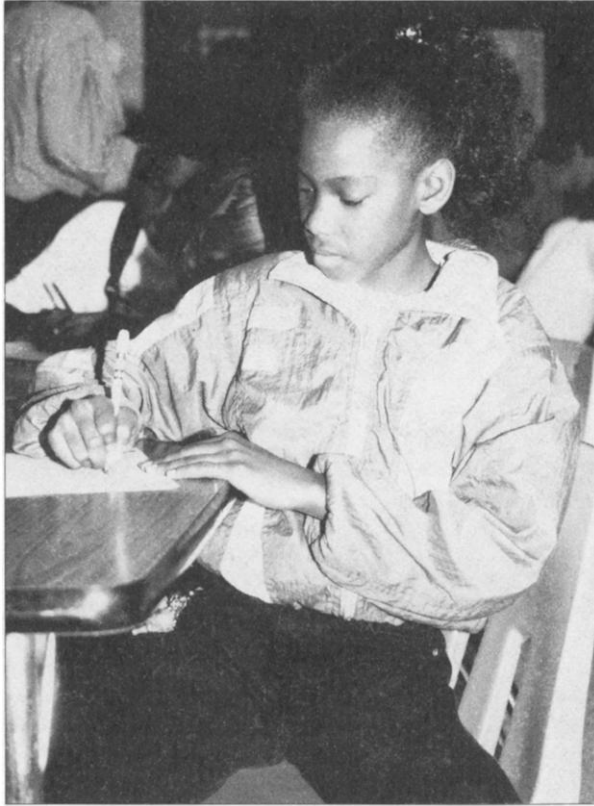
Karla, meanwhile, had decided her first-choice book was a disaster: She had based her selection, in part, on this list of favorite books from David: *Tom Sawyer*, *Escape from Warsaw*, *Hardy Boys*, *The Pearl*, *Where the Red Fern Grows*, *Charlotte's Web*, *A Christmas Carol*. But her pick, Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1976), had a vocabulary more demanding than her students could comfortably handle, and the plot moved far too slowly as well. In a brief note, David's reading partner Sam tried to sum up their problems with the Walpole text and made a suggestion: "I do not like books that take place this far back in history. . . . I would like a more modern book if I could get one, and one that is not so confusing." So, building on a methods-class assignment to explore juvenile literature in a local bookstore, Karla found an alternative—Cynthia Voigt's *Runner* (1985). This time, her reviewers were more enthusiastic, as David sent Karla a brief computer note praising the book's treatment of racism. In her own electronic-mail response, Karla raised a new issue for consideration—the novel's portrayal of family conflict:

I certainly agree that we could all try to get along better regardless of color. Did you have any thoughts about Bullet's parents? Do you think the author should have given more information about Bullet's sister Liza, or his brother, John? What do you think is going to happen next?

Later, when David wrote a letter to his school's seventh graders about his reading for the project, he recommended the text by crafting a description underscoring both his and Karla's readings of the novel's themes:

Dear future eighth graders,

*The Runner* by Cynthia Voigt is a very good book. It is about a boy named Bullet who does not do very well in school and dislikes his father. Bullet's father made life miserable for him and had already driven Bullet's older brother and sister out of the house. Bullet's mom did not stick up for him, probably because she was nervous about the dad. At school, Bullet is the star track runner who cannot be beaten. But when Tamer (a new black student) joins the school, problems start brewing.



When all the eighth-grade readers were asked, as a final assignment for this part of the project, to design a book jacket effectively “advertising” their texts for future potential readers, Karla recognized in David’s careful preparation of his cover another sign of his enthusiasm for Voigt’s novel. After an opening miscalculation, she had responded positively to her students’ attempts to negotiate a change in plans. Having begun the semester seeking ways to enact teacher authority decisively, she ended it moving toward a more student-centered pedagogy.

Sometimes, unfortunately, even the best efforts of the university mentors met continued resistance. Bill, who chose Holly Hunter’s *Running Man* (1963) in response to Tom’s first letter (see headnote), worked hard at motivating a student who, before the project began, was not turning in assignments for the regular classroom teacher. Persistently supportive in his notes to Tom, determinedly creative in his efforts to create engaging writing tasks about the Stephen King novel, Bill at least elicited several (half-hearted?) attempts from this underachieving student. In an effort to build self-confidence, he sent several computer messages re-

iterating the same theme about the writing tasks he was asking Tom to try:

Just write down what you think. There is no absolute right answer I’m looking for because I don’t even have all the answers. I asked you the question I asked because I wanted more ideas and I think you . . . have a lot to offer.

Further, in an effort to mentor both within and beyond the academic sphere, Bill shared details from his own life, including anecdotes about his coaching and the birth of his new baby. Modeling a nurturing male identity, Bill stretched his teaching beyond the “official” project goals and, however few “academic” assignments he completed, Tom responded on a positive personal level. He addressed Bill by nickname, for instance, and mimicked his mentor’s slang word choice and sentence structure.

Nonetheless, despite signs of Tom’s increasing engagement, Bill described his experience in a term-end evaluation as having met with only limited success:

Some may say I took tremendous steps with him, but I need to be realistic and can only say I think we got somewhere, but it wasn’t miles. Every teacher wants to change lives of students for the best; I feel I changed a life only for the slightly better. I hope Tom will continue to walk in that direction.

Bill’s efforts to reach Tom on an affective as well as an academic level, as well as their mutual frustration that they had no face-to-face contact, helped us realize that the next collaboration should include personal visits. Accordingly, face-to-face visits were among the changes we implemented during the second year of the project. Another change we made was to begin with some common readings, then move to choices after the students at both sites knew each other better.

We agreed to begin with a novel that new teachers would likely find in a middle school classroom, *The Outsiders*, by S. E. Hinton. After this we decided to try poetry because this genre can often be challenging for students and teachers. And finally we agreed to pilot a new novel together, *Dragonson* by Anne McCaffrey (1977). The language-arts department of the Ann Arbor School District had been asked to consider the novel for adoption, and we agreed to help with the decision by trying it out in both eighth-grade and university classes.

As had been true in the spring, we faced technological challenges when the long-distance conver-

sations began. At first, eighth graders went down the hall to use the computer, but when they had questions or difficulty there was no one nearby to help. A weekend of rerouting telephone wires enabled us to move the computer to the classroom so students could sign on with their teacher close at hand. While this arrangement eliminated some problems, university students experienced technology-induced frustration. Because the fall university class was much larger than the spring one, we paired students one to one, but the number of eighth graders overwhelmed the equipment. Since there was only one computer for twenty-seven students, eighth graders often had to wait nearly a week between turns at the keyboard. University students grew impatient waiting for answers to their questions.

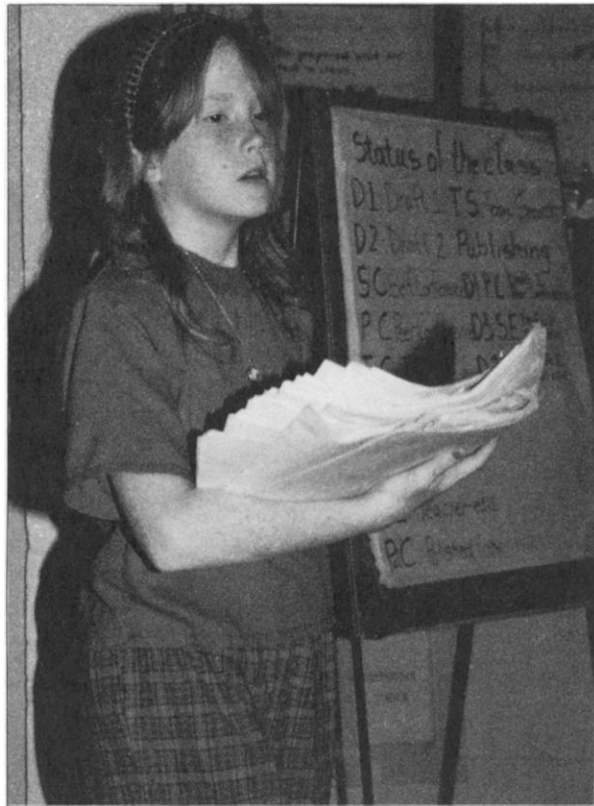
In addition to competing for computer time, many of the eighth graders lacked keyboarding skills, and their messages reflected this. Jason's "I have never read the book that you mentioned on the last message. Got to go. Bye," typified many of the eighth graders' early messages. University students, whose September assignments included writing a literacy profile of their computer buddy, felt anxious about the sparse information on which they had to base their descriptions of an eighth grader's reading and writing practices. Yet, as Leslie noted,

When I am teaching one hundred twenty-five or more students, I probably won't know even this much about some of them. Even though it's difficult, writing this literacy profile reminds me of how important it is to see my students as individuals, to learn about their lives.

And eighth graders recognized the need to improve their skills. As Dan admitted,

I signed up for keyboarding as soon as we started this project because I realized I was only writing a sentence or two in the time I had at the computer. I had a lot more than that to say and I wanted to go faster. Now at least I know where my fingers are supposed to go.

In spite of these problems, both sides immediately expressed pleasure with the experience. Frank, a university student said, "I had forgotten what it's like to be thirteen years old; Sam helps me remember, and remembering will make me a better teacher." Matt, an eighth grader, described his early experience this way:



I wasn't sure what a university student would want to talk to me about, but he asked me so many questions about me that before I thought about it we were talking about my friends by name and other stuff too. He was really cool and I always had something to tell him after that.

Almost immediately, eighth graders and university students began talking about *The Outsiders*. University students embedded questions about the book in their get-acquainted messages. Annie, for example, began by describing trips to Cedar Point, an amusement park, and continued, "I always liked to go to the movies or mall or to a friend's house when I was your age, and I still do. The difference is that I used to go to look for guys and now I can't especially since Chris is usually with us. Well, down to business for a minute. I really want to know what you think of *The Outsiders*. Who is your favorite character?"

Eighth graders found their opinions frequently echoed by their university buddies. Susan explained it this way:

Each time I would read a chapter I might think 'hey, that was neat,' or 'come on that couldn't really hap-

pen,' or 'wow, what would I do if that happened to me?' and she was thinking the same thing when I signed on and read her message the next day. I felt like I could share that when I wrote back to her, too.

Determined to improve on the spring experience by bringing the two groups of students together, we planned three meetings.

The first was in the middle-school auditorium where we gathered to see a film version of *The Outsiders*. When the movie was over, partners had a chance to talk, and the University students gave their buddies a novel they had selected just for them. Writing literacy profiles helped university students make more appropriate choices than had

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their counterparts in the spring term. The middle-school students gave their buddies poetry packets—decorated folders containing the poems we were planning to read—in exchange. This initial visit strengthened ties between the two groups of students. “When we were first waiting to meet our partners, I was kind of nervous,” eighth-grader Donta said.

It was like having this pen pal who seemed real far away suddenly come to visit you. I wasn't sure she would like me when we met—like we might be totally different people. But when we watched the movie and talked it was pretty good, and the next day I really wanted to use the computer to tell her some more things.

University students expressed similar enthusiasm about the meeting. “It's much easier to send messages now that I can visualize the person receiving them,” said Hal.

Between our first and second meetings, both university and eighth-grade students read and discussed poems from the folder.

Our second meeting was at the university. Many of the eighth graders had not been on campus before, so we gave everyone an hour to explore before we gathered in the classroom. Pairs of buddies went to some of the student haunts. Erin said,

I loved going on that trip to see them in their class, it was a lot like being at our school only bigger and more people. But, everyone said 'Hi' and was really friendly. I wanted to stay the rest of the day.

Eighth graders left campus feeling very positive about university life. This introduction to the university was an important side benefit of our project. Since many of the eighth graders could be described as “at risk,” we felt this good experience on campus might help motivate them toward school success. The final visit together was a reception held in our middle-school library. This was a particularly festive gathering with students by now anxious to see one another and with much to share. Chiu-fu stated,

That last time when we saw them I didn't know whether we would ever talk again, but then she asked me for my address so that even in the summer or something like that we could still write to each other. We were reading the rest of the novels and we could find out about the Dragons and I wanted to tell her about some other books I wanted to read, things she kind of liked too.

This meeting gave us an opportunity to talk about *Dragonsong*—we all agreed that the school district should not adopt it—and to admire book covers eighth graders had made for the books they had received earlier in the term.

Both university and eighth-grade students benefited enormously from this collaboration. Students began writing thoughtfully about what they were reading in class without being given an assignment. Students had a clear audience for whom to write, not “just the teacher” or some other nebulous audience. One of the surprise benefits was the access to university life and its expectations through the experiences of a friend, not a paid representative or designated “role model.” The technology of electronic mail offered another benefit because the program would not allow students to do extensive editing. Therefore, they were able to write conversationally and in a relaxed, natural voice. Additionally, the university students encouraged the eighth graders to evaluate their learning by helping them to critique class assignments and to propose alternatives, helping them become more reflective. Surprisingly, as well, many students began to incorporate word-processing skills into their other writing assignments and to rely on the process of writing more fully.

The university students also learned a great deal. As Mike put it,

My experience in the School of Education has taught me all about methods and lesson plans and the history of educational philosophy. But very little about the young people who inhabit our classrooms. The gap between the teacher's and the students' perceptions is often wide. This project has helped me to, momentarily, close the gap.

Another thing university students learned was not to underestimate their students. Jack put it this way:

I was very impressed with Lisa's ability to talk intelligently about complex themes in the book I gave her, as well as *The Outsiders*. I'm sorry to say that I would have grossly underestimated her and her classmates' abilities in this area, had I not talked with her extensively beforehand. If my e-mail correspondences with Lisa have taught me one thing, it's never to underestimate my students' potential and their current abilities. If I keep this in mind, I feel that I will be able to push my students beyond their limits, as well as the ones I establish for them consciously or unconsciously.

Middle-schoolers understood that they had something to teach their university buddies. They offered advice about teaching and about reading. Helen offered this advice:

Well I'll let you go, but there's a book that I love that's only if you plan to teach older people. Maybe you

read it or not, but it's called *Tiger Eyes* by the one and only and my favorite author, Judy Blume.

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## Memberships Available in Committee on Tracking and Grouping Practices in English Language Arts Classrooms, K-12

A limited number of memberships in the recently extended Committee on Tracking and Grouping Practices in English Language Arts Classrooms, K-12, will be available to interested members of the Council. Major functions of the committee are to identify current tracking and grouping practices in English language arts classrooms, K-12, and to examine pertinent research; to define the social, political, and educational issues of tracking; to propose a statement which NCTE can distribute; to propose convention and conference programs for NCTE and other organizations; and to identify successful alternative strategies for English language arts classrooms. If you would like to be considered for membership in this group, send a one-page letter by June 1, 1994, explaining your specific interest in the committee, relevant background, and your present professional work to Candace Fatemi, Administrative Assistant to the Deputy Executive Director, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096.

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