

# University-Middle School Writing Project Serves as Gateway to the Common Core

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**B**y the year 2035, nearly one third of today's public school students will be either refugees or immigrants (Herrera, Cabral, & Murry, 2012). Teacher candidates with little cross-cultural experience, particularly those from a culturally homogenous, rural area, are ill-prepared to teach reading and writing to such an increasingly diverse student body, many of whom are English language learners (ELL). How can we enable these candidates to help all students become active, engaged members of the academic community? More specifically, how can they develop a mind-set that will lead to culturally responsive teaching?

A parallel challenge is for ELL students, particularly recent immigrants and refugees, to understand and thrive in a new and demanding environment. Can they be part of an extended literary conversation given their emerging skills in a second language? Are academic success and higher education part of their future?

## **A Partnership Is Formed**

The interconnected nature of these challenges inspired a multilayered partnership between literacy faculty in the Elementary Education program at Plymouth State University (PSU) and ELL classroom teachers from the Henry J. McLaughlin Jr. Middle School in Manchester, New Hampshire.

Originally founded in 1871 as a normal school serving the rural areas of central New Hampshire, PSU has grown into a comprehensive regional university enrolling approximately 272 undergraduate students in its Elementary Education and Childhood Studies program.

## PRACTITIONERS SPEAK

Teacher candidates participate in an integrated, two-semester series of academic classes and field experience prior to full-time student teaching. The literacy component includes a foundations course in early reading, followed by a language arts methodology course focusing on grades 4–8. Nearly half of these candidates are first-generation college students, many from rural areas in New Hampshire and Massachusetts. Unlike past generations of PSU teacher candidates, however, today's graduates will find employment far from home, challenged to work with students from vastly different cultural and linguistic backgrounds in a new era of Common Core accountability.

McLaughlin Middle School serves more than 850 6th–8th grade students from New Hampshire's largest city, Manchester. A diverse community recognized as a designated refugee resettlement center, McLaughlin provides a transitional program for ELL students to build English proficiency before joining mainstream academic classes with their native-speaking peers. Two certified ELL teachers build a supportive classroom community for approximately 146 students representing 32 countries and 20 language groups. Students include both refugees and immigrants, some with only a few months of experience in US culture. Sheltered instruction strategies are used in an English-only environment to make academic content meaningful and accessible.

### An Adventure Begins

The needs of both institutions led to an opportunity: pair teacher candidates with ELL middle school students for an extended, authentic literacy experience. For one semester, approximately 40 PSU candidates and 40 McLaughlin students would join each other for a literary adventure. They would read a book together and discuss it *in writing* through a weekly exchange of letters. Literary text was the focus of the dialogue but also a catalyst for the partners to get to know one another as individuals, as readers, as writers, and as human beings.

The project began in the middle school classroom. PSU faculty and candidates traveled to Manchester to meet their new partners, but in a creative way. Following an ancient storytelling tradition, each partner prepared a bag with objects that held deep personal significance, objects remindful of family, friends, hob-

bies, hopes, dreams, disappointments—any tangible representation of that person's life. One by one, strangers spoke. Objects were shared, stories emerged, and friendships begun.

Following this “Life in a Bag” introduction, partners continued to visit in small groups before returning to their daily routines, an hour and a world apart. Their relationships, however, would grow as they read and discussed a middle school novel. ELL students with the least background in English read *Facing the Lion: Growing Up Maasai on the African Savanna* (Lekuton & Viola, 2003), an autobiographical novel of a young man's journey to the US as an immigrant. More advanced ELL students read *Inside Out and Back Again* (Lai, 2011), a novel in poetry form that depicts a young girl and her family's struggle as refugees fleeing war-torn Vietnam in the 1970s.

After weeks of reading and corresponding with their journal partners, McLaughlin students traveled to PSU for an on-campus visit. The day was a personal introduction to life on a college campus; partners celebrated their journal experience together by preparing a poster project and presenting it to their peers.

### Grounded in Theory

The theoretical underpinnings of this project reflect Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading (Galda & Cullinan, 2005), which suggests that instead of absorbing one right meaning from a text, readers rely on their own background knowledge and create unique meanings. Furthermore, meaning does not reside in the text alone, waiting for a reader to unearth it; meaning is created in the transaction—the interaction—that occurs between a reader and the text. As the person reads, personal experiences, feelings, preferences, and reasons for reading guide the construction of meaning.

Additionally, Rosenblatt believes that aesthetic reading—more specifically, being aware of the sound and feeling of a text, as well as identifying with characters and participating in the story—is one very important part of the reading process (Galda & Cullinan, 2005). In this project, we saw validation of Rosenblatt's theory. Both populations of students, university and middle school, interacted with the text based on their own individual, lived experience, resulting in a rich and diverse discussion that was heavily influenced by the social context of the reading experience.

### An Integrated Model of Literacy

The Common Core State Standards for English language arts provide educators with clearly established curricular goals in the areas of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The partnership was built upon the idea that both middle school students

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and teacher candidates can develop a stronger and more robust understanding of how these skills can be integrated through a joint literacy project.

The Common Core States Standards Initiative (2010) suggests that literate individuals “comprehend and evaluate complex texts and build on others’ ideas, articulate their own ideas, and confirm they have been understood” (p. 7). Furthermore, they suggest a critical perspective that is fostered within an integrated model of literacy:

Students actively seek to understand other perspectives and cultures through reading and listening, and they are able to communicate effectively with people of varied backgrounds. They evaluate other points of view critically and constructively. Through reading great classic and contemporary works of literature representative of a variety of periods, cultures, and worldviews, students can vicariously inhabit worlds and have experiences much different than their own. (p. 7)

This framework supports the practice of close reading, known to foster deep comprehension. The Partnership for Assessment of

Readiness for College and Careers notes that a “significant body of research links the close reading of complex text—whether the student is a struggling reader or advanced—to significant gains in reading proficiency and finds close reading to be a key component of college and career readiness” (2011).

**Close Reading by Design**

When conceiving the project, the team felt that the dynamics of reading a text and then preparing written responses to a partner would result in a rich interplay of key literacy skills. A reader-response cycle was envisioned that required both teacher candidates and ELL students to return to the novel to answer questions raised by their partner, to clarify understandings, or to find examples that supported their thinking. New insights and bits of information gained from the text were then incorporated into the written response. The result was a multistep cycle that fostered close reading.

Central to the concept of close reading is the practice of rereading. Routman states that “[w]hen given opportunities to reread material, readers’ comprehension always goes up. And research consistently shows that rereading is one of the most highly recommended strategies for struggling readers” (2002, p. 122). The requirements of the journal project were designed to provide those opportunities, thus supporting two goals: (1) helping ELL students become strategic readers and (2) enabling teacher candidates to see and experience the importance of strategic reading in practice.

**A Context for Growth**

The opening “Life in a Bag” activity provided the first opportunity for written reflection between partners. Usa, an 8th grade student from Nepal, shows that she is comfortable sharing her

Figure 1. Reading Response Cycle

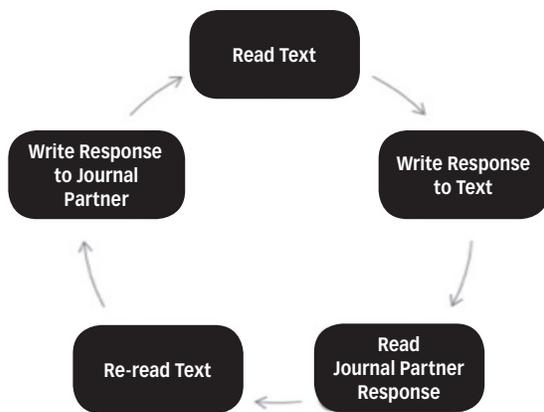


Figure 2. Writing Prompts

**Sample Writing Prompts to Promote Close Reading**

1. Explain what happens in the poem “Most Relieved Day.” What can the reader infer about Steven and Pam? How does this poem mark a turning point in the book?
2. Explain how Hà adapts to her surroundings over the course of the book. At what point do things begin to get better for her? Describe the specific episodes that lead to positive changes in her life.
3. What does the author (Joseph) mean in Chapter 3 when he says, “Cows are our way of life”?
4. Joseph lost the cows in Chapter 6. How did his brother make sure this did not happen again?

## PRACTITIONERS SPEAK

feelings of fear and anxiety. She writes, “I was nervous about the life in a bag project when it was my turn to present I was thinking about which item I wanted to show first.” Usa’s next letter reflected on the importance of the personal items she chose to share and how they kept her connected to her home and her culture, as well as her interest in learning about others.

Early responses for students tended to focus on aspects of personal life and interests. Usa appeared to be comfortable writing about family activities and her hobby of dancing:

We have a large family. We come together we eat, we cooked, we dance. I love to dance. Now I am practicing for program. Many people will come to watch. I am very excited.

The exchanges reflect a developing social relationship. Usa is motivated to respond to her journal partner and comfortable expressing herself in English. This dynamic illustrates Krashen’s concept of the “affective filter” for English language learners. He suggests that “learners with high motivation, self-confidence, a good self-image, and a low level of anxiety are better equipped for success in second language acquisition” (2007, “Description of Krashen’s Theory of Second Language Acquisition,” para. 10). Usa’s series of exchanges reflect this dynamic, indicating that the journal project cultivated a positive climate for growth. Middle school ELL students, traditionally reluctant to share personal experiences with strangers, began to share their journeys from their native countries to their new homes in America. Teachers began to observe a building sense of trust in their students. For Usa, responding to her partner was a pleasurable, motivating, and low-stress opportunity to develop as an English language learner.

### Connecting to Text

In the weeks to follow, McLaughlin teachers noticed a shift in Usa’s writing. Her conversations about the text started to show more connections, including meaningful questions about the story:

Now I am trying very hard to learn English. Reading the book *Facing the Lion* is not easy for me. Because I don’t understand the words and meaning. I understand little bit about the reading. I understand it is about the life of a boy from Africa. His family has lot of cows. They protect the cows from the lion and animals.

As Usa and her journal partner continued to exchange weekly letters, Usa included details and dialogue about the text that showed

evidence of her deeper engagement in and understanding of the story:

In chapter 5, I am very scared when the authorities had to come to Joseph’s home because I thought Joseph’s don’t know anything about school. He did not have a money so I think if Joseph’s did not have a money how can he goes to school and the school is far away from the Joseph home.

With the structure provided by her teachers, Usa begins to pose questions to her journal partner, such as, “I am going to asked one question to you ... can person have two worlds, two cultures?” This led to more extended writing and small research projects to learn about the author, Joseph Lekuton, and his life as a Kenyan nomad and later as a social studies teacher in the United States.

Throughout the discussions surrounding the text, Usa exhibited the habits of good readers, making connections from text to text, text to self, and text to world. Social negotiation of meaning and a developing friendship were clearly evident. Usa expressed her thoughts, such as, “I was very happy to receive your letter. Thank you for letting me know that my writing is getting better. I have enjoyed writing to you and I liked getting you are letter. It sounds like you have fun holiday traditions with all your family.”

During the culminating activity for the project, Usa spent several hours with her journal partner on the PSU campus. They both came prepared with research, written text, and visuals to use for a joint presentation. Usa’s closing comments show the impact of the experience: “I liked Reading and Sharing Information about the book with my partner. It was fun. I want to do it again. When I gave my presentation I was nervous, but my partner helped me. I was happy. I learned a lot.” Compared to her beginning feelings of high anxiety and fear, she showed genuine growth in these concluding comments.

### Connecting Deeply to Text

The dialogue between Abdul and Jessica, his PSU partner, illustrates the evolution of deeper connections to both text and personal background. Abdul, a 7th grade student who spent time in a Kenyan refugee camp, made a strong connection to war and cultural identity:

Something important about reading this book is life and how people from other country’s come to America and how they feel. When they are going to school they don’t know anyone there.

As a refugee who had experienced war in his home country, he can identify with the character's experience. He continued the dialogue to say:

What I think about the war is that war is not nice because people die in war a lot sometimes even hundred people during war. I know how Ha is feeling about all the controversy because we have read to the part where she doesn't know if her father is going to come and she wants the war to end as fast as possibility.

Abdul shared very personal reflections with Jessica as they began to build trust. His classroom ELL instructor had worked with him for more than two years, yet had been unsuccessful in fostering this kind of open response. The journal project, however, touched Abdul at a more personal level where he felt safe enough to express his feelings on paper.

Abdul, described by his teachers as somewhat reluctant and often unmotivated, continued to write, reflecting deeply on ideas of war, a key theme for *Inside Out and Back Again*:

I know that Ha is not a fan of war why cause she really wants everything to go back to how it is and she wants her dad to come home. War stands for people fight for religion, land or control of power people fighting what they want to happen or believe. What I feel about this book is I think that this book is sad. Because all the war and how they don't have enough money and they don't know if there father is alive or not.

Abdul and Jessica's written exchange built a mutual respect for one another's culture. Jessica expressed her respect and empathy for the main character, Ha, which helped bridge the differences between Abdul's life and her own. What began as a simple dialogue evolved into a collaboration of ideas and feelings. Both writing partners thought creatively and learned about each other in a safe and trusting environment.

#### **International Literature: Gateway to Understanding**

The choice of international texts for the project highlighted the power dynamics inherent in the literary conversation. In many traditional reading circumstances, the teacher candidate would enjoy an advantage over the ELL student, given his/her experience with literature and native fluency. However, the use of international literature shifted those power dynamics. Chosen for their degree of cultural relevance for the younger population, the novels featured characters and settings in Africa and Vietnam, thus

offering many points of reference for ELL students not seen in their core middle school curriculum. This gave them a sense of personal connection to the text, validating their knowledge and past experience. However, this was not necessarily because they came from these countries but because they saw connections in traditions, rituals, and struggles that were similar to their own.

The following exchange about Joseph's life in *Facing the Lion* illustrates how a few simple lines in a story can spark understanding. The PSU candidate offers what she thought would be an invitation to agreement and was amazed by the student's response:

Can you imagine walking so far to go to school or see your family? Don't you think that it is strange that he would walk 20 miles to go to school?

Yes. I can imagine walking 20 miles just to see my friends because friends are like my family and I have my best friend his name is Mojesh and his last name is Gurung he is Nepali too and is your best friend name and I like to walk little bit not much I always walk in my country do you like to walk in my country I walked like 30 or 40 in one day.

Differing cultural experiences put the young ELL reader in the position of "expert" when responding in English to their journal partner, adding a level of comfort for the emerging writer. For the teacher candidate, the shift in power put the "teacher" in the position of learning from and respecting the student's unique knowledge base and ability to interpret text.

#### **A Structure for Success**

We found that international literature formed a vibrant, dynamic basis for fostering active literacy when rooted in reading and writing for a genuine audience and purpose. However, this dynamic is a complex one, heavily influenced by the social context. The impact of carefully constructed partnerships forged a relationship that resulted in new opportunities for reading and writing in students across age groups.

As opposed to traditional school writing projects, where students wrote to an imagined, academic audience, often the teacher, both middle school and college students had reciprocal responsibility to read and respond to each other. Students of both age ranges were anxious to receive and read their partners' letters, then write a thoughtful response. We saw that when educators craft literacy activities that connect to social factors, students read and write with purpose and motivation.

## PRACTITIONERS SPEAK

The structured nature of the journal project required a weekly exchange of letters about the text. The time frame for reading and the audience for response were clearly defined, resulting in greater motivation: they had to read in order to write. In particular, they had to return to the text for a close reading to meet both social and academic goals as well as the emerging demands of the Common Core.

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