**Letter Writing: Creative Vehicle to Higher-Level Thinking**

By

Joseph A. Naumann, Jr.

McCluer North High School

Florissant, Missouri

St. Charles County Community College

St. Charles, Missouri

August 3, 1989

Submitted to *Social Education*

Published by *Social Education* in 1991

**ABSTRACT.**

General-level high school students were motivated to learn and write in their world history class. While studying selected historical periods, students were asked to assume roles of people during those periods. Students then wrote letters to other persons of those times. Through careful preparation by the teacher, students did library research, shared their research, and wrote letters. In gathering information and writing about the topics specified by the teacher, these students used higher-level thought processes than they usually did in class. KEY WORDS: motivation, cooperative learning, right-brained, thought processes, retention.

**Letter Writing: Creative Vehicle to Higher-Level Thinking**

General-level students who normally were unmotivated and unresponsive got involved in research and writing in world history classes at McCluer North High School in Florissant, Missouri. They engaged in higher-level thought processes, in cooperative learning, in developing organizational skills, and in practicing composition skills. They did this by assuming roles in the historical periods being studied and by writing letters. This approach to writing produced a much higher than usual level of motivation, but the most important outcome was that students got involved in levels of thinking which are seldom used by general-level students in world history classes.

Motivating students to write has always been difficult. When general-level students are asked to write essays, the two most common responses are to copy from an encyclopedia or to refuse to do the assignment. Writing a letter was not as threatening to them as writing an essay so the completion rate for the assignment was higher than usual.

The first letter was assigned after students had studied ancient Greece and while they were studying the Roman Empire. The assignment was presented in a newsletter format to give it more eye appeal and more motivational potential. The articles in the newsletter clearly defined the expectations, the process, and the finished product. Each student was to assume the role of an educated Greek from Athens who was working for a Roman senator as a tutor to his sons. The students were told how long they had lived with the family and what types of experiences they may have had with them. The assignment was for each student to write a letter to his brother Nicholas who had never left Athens.

Each letter had to discuss five topics from a list of eight topics. The topics were: Roam roads, the Roman military, Roman Engineering, Pompeii (the date given was several years before it was destroyed), Roman government, Roman literature, the Roman baths, and the Roman Forum. Students were told that good letters would do more than describe; they would compare and contrast life in the Roman Empire with life in Athens. For this first letter of the year, students were given a listing of the pages in their text which had information on the topics. Topics which could be found in encyclopedias were also listed in the newsletter.

Students were given one day in the library to work together gathering and sharing information. They were given a week to complete the letter. With the letter due on a Monday, they were given the preceding Friday to write in class, with the teacher available for assistance. Many students employed their imaginations to produce creative, interesting letters.

Later assignments built on the experience and successes of the first letter. Students picked the characters they would be from several choices, including both genders, and wrote letters which might have been written from the Holy Land during the time of the First Crusade. Another assignment involved an American writing from France during the French Revolution.

They also studied about Mahatma Gandhi, identified a modern problem of injustice which would probably attract his attention, and wrote to him. In that letter, they had to tell why they admired him, what they had learned about living from his example, and what they knew of the problem. Then they had to ask for his help (they were assuming that he was still alive). Students were asked not to offer solutions because the types of problems they were to identify did not offer themselves to obvious, easy solutions.

**MOTIVATING STUDENTS**

Students at McCluer North High school were definitely motivated by these assignments. Several students checked books out from the library and read sizeable parts of them. Some students used their artistic talents to illustrate their letters with sketches. A few students even stayed after school on the weekly "help day" to get extra help. A key to student interest and motivation was in their "ownership" of the information and the vehicle through which it was expressed. When students were asked to allow their letters to be posted on the library wall for several weeks, most students allowed their letters to be used. Their pride in ownership could be seen as they brought their friends to the library to see their letters during the lunch period. Many students indicated on the course evaluation that they felt that they retained the information they used in the letters more than the other information presented in the course. This indicated that an added benefit was improved retention of the material studied.

The motivational potential and the lack of threat in these assignments were clear in many of the letters, but one letter stood out. It was written by a student who rarely ever spoke in class. He frequently did not turn in homework assignments. He failed to take opportunities to make-up missed work, and usually got "D's" or "C’S" on tests. His letter from the First Crusade was more than ten pages long. In it, he anguished about the "call he heard from God" when he heard Pope Urban call for a crusade and the reality of death and destruction that was involved in the execution of that "call." He expressed his torment several times in the context of specific examples which illustrated the paradox he was living. From the point of view of composition, the letter was not flawless, but the content far exceeded what was hoped for when the assignment was given.

**EMPLOYING HIGHER-LEVEL THINKING**

Though good composition was desired, the major emphasis was on the content and the thought processes used. In each assignment after the first letter, the instructions required increasing- use of higher-level thought processes. To compare and contrast the evolutionary development of democratic government in England with the violent upheaval they were witnessing in France, students had to do more than merely recall what was studied about England and France. The students had to analyze both processes to compare and contrast them. They had to synthesize the information before they could write it in their own words. These skills were used again when they compared the American and French revolutions. In the letter to Mahatma Gandhi, students had to use these skills again and then apply their understanding of Gandhi and his principles to a current situation. They employed evaluation when they decided what they considered admirable about Gandhi's life. In clearly conceptualized and well organized letter-writing assignments, students employed all levels of Bloom's Taxonomy: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

This letter-writing technique has many possible uses in social studies. Situations which lend themselves to this technique can be identified in psychology, geography, history, sociology, anthropology, and economics. Using letters to get students thinking and writing can be adapted to other disciplines as well.

**PREPARATION: KEY TO SUCCESS**

Successful use of this technique depends on students being well prepared by their teacher. Students need to know what is expected of them. They also need to know how and where to get the necessary background information. This can be done by having them work cooperatively in the library for a day under the supervision of their teacher. Before going to the library, students need to know what choices they have to make: who they will be as letter writers, what topics must be discussed in the letter, what topics may be discussed in the letter, and who is receiving the letter.

The teacher may also provide students with a list of possible sources of information in addition to the textbook. Special handouts, movies, and illustrated lectures may be used to provide information. A study guide which asks students to answer several dozen questions may be used to help students organize information for long letters. Supplying students with sample letters with similar format, but on a different topic may help them visualize what the finished product will look like -­ this is particularly helpful to students whose tendency is to process information in the right hemisphere of the brain. Allowing students to include graphic materials of their own making in their letters also helps "right-brained" students express what they know.

If students clearly know what is expected, have guidance for getting the information, know what the final and intermediate deadlines are for handing in the paper or parts of it, and can see a sample product, they will succeed. Students should also be given a copy of the rubric the teacher will use when grading the letters.

**BENEFITS AND POTENTIALS**

This technique certainly had benefits in the cognitive domain irithe educational process, but it also had the potential to access the affective domain as well. This potential is inherent in the use of higher-level thought processes like evaluation. It is also accessed when students use their imaginations in assuming roles. Taking the role of a character enabled the students to grow in the ability to empathize with it.

To build on the successes of the past school year, a possible series of lesions for the coming school year might show students how to rewrite good letters into good essays. There is also the potential for cooperative teaching among social studies and English teachers. The letter could be the vehicle for reducing student writing fears. Then by deleting the personal material and by rewriting the remainder somewhat, good essays could be produced.