

Writing Across State Lines

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In an age where it seems everything is digital, writing a letter can seem tedious. Why write a letter when you can post on a friend's social media page? Why write an entire page worth of sentences when you can type 140 characters or less and get your voice heard by millions upon millions of Twitter users? If adults think this way, what are children taught about writing? Writing a letter is much more personal. It takes time, energy, and emotional intelligence. You have to care about who you are writing to, and be genuinely curious about their lives. Because of that curiosity, empathy and letter writing go hand in hand. At the Shelton Timberland Library, my colleagues and I are constantly strategizing new programs and events to engage children and teens in a way that promotes learning and encourages growth while also being fun for them. Teaching empathy and celebrating diversity are at the forefront of our goals, and included in everything we do, and I have found that there is no better way to do that than to inspire youth to learn about other people.

Our Pen Pal program started with an idea from Shalyn Rodriguez at the Shorewood-Troy Public Library in Illinois. She is the Assistant Director and also manages the Children's Department. Shalyn and I have never met in person. We went to graduate school online at the University of Washington, and had a few classes together. We emailed back and forth, and became Facebook friends. Like many online students, our relationship was purely digital. And when Shalyn posted about starting a Pen Pal program for school age kids and tagged me, I was intrigued. A Pen Pal program would be a great way to get our young patrons engaging with each other. But what would it look like?

At first Shalyn's idea revolved around a scheduled program where children could sit at computers and chat with each other from different states on pre-made Google Hangout library accounts. Staff running the program from each location would be able to monitor the chats. She had reached out to several libraries in an effort to get this program running and hoped to have a large network of libraries participating, but after a series of "No, we just do not have the time to work on that right now," she was relying on our library. I discussed the idea at a department meeting and received the ok to begin planning this program with Shalyn. We determined that an asynchronous program would suit us best, and be more adaptable to other eventual locations. After some discussion, we decided it would be best to start this program off with a display.

The display grew into what would become a popular passive program, with kids of all ages and abilities writing letters or drawing pictures to send across state lines! At the Shelton Timberland Library, a talented and creative teen volunteer built a large mailbox out of cardboard, and we put that at the Information Desk. The bright blue mailbox is hard to miss. In the kids' section, we put paper, pencils, crayons, envelopes, and instructions for kids to write letters or draw pictures to send to the Shorewood-Troy Library. The kids drop them off in the mailbox, and every week I scan and send them to Shalyn

via email. She does the same for me. Then, we print the letters and put them on display. At first the letters are general, and are written to “Dear Pen Pal.” As the letters become more personalized, I add a sign to the display that says “If your name is [first name], visit the Information Desk to receive a letter from your Pen Pal!” We both agreed that starting a brand new passive program like this was best to develop just between the two libraries, until we could iron out the details and make the program as successful as possible.

Our display also includes information on the Shorewood-Troy Library and Illinois. I printed a picture of the state flag with facts from one of our online databases, CultureGrams, and instructions about how to get to the database on our website. I also placed books on hold that featured kids writing letters to Pen Pals, and books on Illinois. When the Pen Pal program first started, I displayed the books during our Wednesday morning Storytime and told the toddlers that they could practice drawing pictures to their new friends or they could have a grown-up help them write a letter. I read a few Pen Pal themed books during Storytime; my favorite is *Same, Same but Different* by Jenny Sue Kostecki-Shaw for the bright, colorful illustrations and Kostecki-Shaw’s engaging way of inspiring young children to make friends outside of the place they call home.

As of this week, 115 letters have been sent to Illinois and 73 letters have been received from the Shorewood-Troy Public Library. The kids are sincerely showing interest in each other and ask questions which range from “Do you like My Little Pony?” to “How was your spring break?” and my absolute favorite: “Will you be my friend?” They are curious about each other and want to learn about how each other live, and share their favorite things with each other. In the meantime, they get to practice using their writing skills and learn about other parts of the country.

In the future, we hope to expand the Pen Pal program to more states and to other countries! We are actively working on establishing a relationship with a library or school in Nairobi, and are considering partnering with public libraries in areas that have recently experienced natural disaster. We hope to build bridges with other libraries, schools, and children all over the world. At the end of the summer, we plan to bring in the Google Hangout idea for the kids who participated in the Pen Pal program. It would be a way for the children to see who they are talking to and to celebrate their new friendships. We want to remind them that there are kids all over the world who are just as curious as they are, and hopefully inspire them to grow up to be caring, compassionate, and empathetic adults.