

## 22 Community and the Writing Lab

John Neil Graham  
Valentine Middle School  
Valentine, Nebraska

At the Valentine Middle School, all of the seventh- and eighth-grade students come to the writing lab each day because it is a required class. The writing lab has replaced a morning study hall. Now the students alternate every twelve weeks between writing lab, art, and physical education. The assignments consist of individual daily writing assignments and individual and group writing projects. Most of the students' assignments take them into the community for research, sharing, and publication.

The autobiography assignment requires the students to write about their past, present, and future. This task sends them into the community to do research into their own family's background, since a majority of the students' families still reside locally. The assignment also allows the students to look ahead to what the community will offer them in regard to school and job possibilities.

The middle school students share their writings with the community in various ways. They write a weekly poetry section for the local paper that is based on poems or freewriting taken from their personal writing folders. The students write and record radio spots for National Education Week: these are ten-, twenty-, and thirty-second announcements concerning the students' feelings toward education. The students also write Christmas cards to armed services personnel who are stationed overseas during the holidays.

I teach a weekly expressive writing class at Pine View Good Samaritan Center; the middle school students also share their work with the residents of this facility. For example, one of the middle school students' assignments is to write about old age or the aging process. I take those writings and let the residents expand them. One student wrote the following:

### The Old Fashion Days

A girl in her long dress and bonnet,  
 With new bright designs on it.  
 A man in his black hat,  
 Wearing it wherever he is at.  
 They were simple in their ways,  
 In those long ago old fashion days.

A one-room cabin was their house,  
 In the evening it was quiet as a mouse.  
 Someone would tell a riddle,  
 While another would play a fiddle.  
 They were simple in their ways,  
 In those long ago old fashion days.

The residents took the idea and the form and produced this poem:

### The Old Fashion Days

A girl in her long dress and bonnet,  
 With new bright designs on it.  
 A man in his black hat,  
 Wearing it wherever he is at.  
 They were simple in their ways,  
 In those long ago old fashion days.

A one-room log cabin was their house,  
 In the evening it was quiet as a mouse.  
 A heated brick with protective wrapping,  
 Kept them warm until the rooster's flapping.  
 They were simple in their ways,  
 In those long ago old fashion days.

The Saturday night bath in the old wash tub,  
 Was a place you could sit and scrub.  
 In the summer it was fun,  
 But in the winter it was pick up your towel and run.  
 They were simple in their ways,  
 In those long ago old fashion days.

Lumber wagons supplied,  
 The things upon which they relied.  
 Gardens were planted and raised,  
 And the good Lord was always praised.  
 They were tough in their ways,  
 In those long ago old fashion days.

The cook toted a gun and a Climax chew,  
 While he concocted his ole stew.  
 The ingredients were never the same,  
 But rabbits and prairie chickens were always the game.  
 They were tough in their ways,  
 In those long ago old fashion days.

Cream and butter were stored in the well,  
You had to keep it sweet or the baby would yell.  
Hams were smoked or put in brine,  
Salty enough to float an egg just fine.  
They were tough in their ways,  
In those long ago old fashion days.

By Amy Hartgrave and The Pine View Residents  
(Used with permission.)

On another assignment, I asked the students at each site to write an "I Wish" poem. The middle school students were astonished as I read the residents' poems to them. The middle school students had written about obtaining cars, houses, money, and other material possessions, while the residents wrote about the pain of growing old and dying.

#### I Wish

I wish I would be in my own home.  
I wish I could see better.  
I wish I could hear better.  
I wish God would take me in my sleep.  
I wish it didn't cost so much here.  
I wish the doctors didn't give me so many pills.

By Ella Reddick  
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The students' and residents' individual and group writings are published in *The Heart City Writing Shop*. I type the poems the students and I have selected, and then we use the school's copier to print the sheets. This publication is printed once every twelve weeks for each section of the middle school that uses the writing lab. Each student and resident receives a copy, and copies are circulated throughout the community and sent to the directors of the Nebraska Writing Project.

Some students and residents have had their work published in other releases. A local printing company asked the writing lab students to write Valentine's Day poems, and the company chose one middle school student's poem for publication. One thousand copies have been printed this year, and another thousand will be printed next year. Also, the residents submitted several of their writings to The Nebraska Writing and Storytelling Festival. Four residents had their writings published in the Festival's booklet.

Word has spread that the writing lab needs to be used. Several teachers have given us ideas for writing projects, along with members of the community. As the students write, they are very careful with their content and grammar because they know their audience is not only fellow students and their teachers, but also a whole community

who might read their material. Feedback for writing lab students is also very important, and the students and residents do receive tremendous response. Relatives and friends call the students and residents when their work appears in the paper. Several students have received letters from the service personnel to whom they have written. By using the community as an audience for the writing lab, a powerful interaction takes place between the writers and their audience.