10 Assessment through Collaborative Critique

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I n 1994, we were participants in the initial summer institute of the Kennesaw Mountain Writing Project, a National Writing Project site located just north of Atlanta, Georgia. Though we came to the five-week workshop from different, recent teaching experiences—high school and college (Sarah), elementary grades (Sue), and middle school (Jennifer)—we found that we shared many beliefs and interests. At the institute, we discovered how valuable it is for teachers of writing to have substantial time to develop *themselves* as writers—to have intense, yet communally supported, opportunities for writing, sharing, and reflecting. In addition, we learned through *studying* writing instruction and by *doing* many, varied kinds of writing together which we were strongly committed to making a key part of a socially nurturing learning program for our students. Ideally and, perhaps, not sur-

prisingly, by the end of the summer we felt that the best kind of writing program for our students would look a lot like the NWP institute we'd just experienced. It would be a risk-free environment with many opportunities for idea-sharing discussions and for writing in a wide variety of genres about personally and intellectually meaningful topics. It would be a community committed to both individual and group reading interests. It would emphasize the *process* of learning to communicate; the products created in our classrooms, in other words, would be made to promote and assess learning rather than to provide artificial evidence of schoolwork done for a grade.

However, as fall approached, we realized we couldn't exactly duplicate the writing project in our regular classrooms. Though our respective institutions place a high value on student-centered learning, they also require teachers to turn in grades at the end of each marking period, so we could not entirely escape the role of "scorer" of student writing. Building on our NWP experience, we wanted to integrate the practice of writing and its assessment more fully and constructively, promote students' ongoing evaluation of their own writing processes, and move as far away as possible from the role of teacher as red-pen-wielder, judging student texts by way of decontextualized standards (Robbins et al., "Negotiating Authority"; Johnston; Elbow). But we also knew that working in places where quantifiable measures of student progress were receiving increasing support from stakeholders—such as local school board officials and state test writers—complete elimination of grades from our writing programs wouldn't be feasible—yet. Still, we hoped to be assertive communicators to our students, their parents, and the school administrators about the value of ungraded approaches to evaluating writing. And we suspected that one of the best ways to begin winning others over to our viewpoint would be to have them see some of the benefits of such writing up close.

Seeking a Socially Nurturing Writing Experience

Besides sharing these goals for writing pedagogy, we had discovered, in our discussions during the summer institute, that we held a common interest in classroom research and a related belief that allowing students to be active participants in inquiry-based curricula could enrich their literacy and their critical thinking (Stock; Fleischer). We believed, for example, that the intensive, critique-focused reading, writing, and discussions we'd shared had been supportive of our own

development as writers and teachers of writing—in ways that neither a punitively grade-conscious classroom, on the one hand, nor a totally unstructured out-of-school literacy experience, on the other, could have been. We had just been "back to school," in fact, but in a self-consciously challenging, yet supportive, setting where the *process* of learning was something we constantly questioned together, and where our many diverse written products were continually evaluated in terms of context-specific goals but not scored. For instance, we had all written round-robin computer responses to an oral performance; letters to each of our colleague teacher-presenters, identifying strengths and weaknesses in their demonstrations; personal literacy narratives; brief writing-to-learn exercises, such as texts where we wrote word pictures "like a camera," recording something we observed; and a polished piece of our choice for the institute's anthology. Though none of these had received individual grades, each had been constructively assessed in a variety of ways by a number of readers, including, of course, the authors. All of these supportive social literacy events had belied the school-versus-real world dichotomy we had sometimes seen others invoke during arguments calling for radical reconceptualizations of school-based literacy.

At the core of our shared beliefs and goals, then, was a related commitment to pedagogy as a nurturing enterprise in a nonhierarchical, noncompetitive environment consistent with feminist and social constructivist theory (Grumet) and with our recent positive experiences as writing project teachers and learners. So, despite the differences in our teaching sites, as the 1994 school year began, we were all three seeking to make literacy practices in school more authentically and constructively social. We intended to do so not by throwing out the intellectual rigor of studying English/language arts in favor of doing just "real life" activities, but by integrating the two via collaborative evaluation of the learning process itself, rather than discrete grading of particular student products (Robbins et al., "Using Portfolio Reflections"; Willinsky).

With these ideas encouraging us, we felt that a cross-level research project, centered around ungraded writing, could support our ongoing efforts at classroom-level and systemic instructional reform, while at the same time helping us to further develop our thinking together. Specifically, we decided to work *with* our students on a project to make school writing more constructive and less stressful—to create at least some opportunities for them to experience the kind of challenging, yet grade-free, writing we had enjoyed at our

institute. We read several action-research studies as models (Dyson; Jensen; Lipson; McWhirter; West) and *The Art of Classroom Inquiry* (Hubbard and Power) to help frame our questions and to explore possible approaches for involving our students. Then we developed a tentative set of "wonderings to pursue" (Atwell 315). We wondered if we could guide our students through classroom-connected, but ungraded, writing tasks that would effectively support both the specific curriculum objectives of our three different teaching settings *and* our broader common goals for writing instruction. After discussions identifying the major points of overlap between our shared aims and the level-specific instructional objectives we knew we would need to document, we chose cross-level letter writing as the particular focus for our project; the informal, friendly letter seemed to be a genre not only well suited to giving our students challenging ungraded writing experiences, but also adaptable to the particular material conditions of our teaching situations.

We planned to have students from Sarah's college and Sue's elementary school write on multiple occasions to the same class of Jennifer's middle schoolers, who would send a number of letters back to both groups. The letters themselves would *always* be ungraded, but we would use the occasions of composing, revising, and small- and whole-class review of our writing to discuss and critique such concepts as audience, genre traits, dialogic composing, formal versus informal language, and the effects of a text's appearance on the reading process. We would share our research questions and what we learned with our students and the K–12 students' parents, while inviting them to help us build some new knowledge growing out of the constant reflection on the writing processes we were exploring. One aspect of this sharing involved our *own* letter writing—a note to parents which explained our reasons for devoting class time to ungraded writing. The letters sent home to parents also requested permission for us to share students' writing samples from the letter writing research with audiences beyond the classroom, such as other teachers at staff development workshops and the readers of this essay. (Sarah secured similar releases from her college students.) Only one participant from the three classes preferred not to have her writing samples shared publicly. The three of us met regularly for ongoing evaluation of the project, but throughout its life (until January for the college class, longer for the K–12 participants), we each continued to teach within our individual writing programs, which included having students produce other texts that could be evaluated in more traditional ways.

Beginning Our Classroom Research Project on Ungraded Writing

In the fall of 1994, all three of us were striving to reconcile our personal goals for writing pedagogy with mandates shaped outside our classrooms (Duffy). Sue was lead teacher in a fourth-grade "inclusion" classroom at Mountain View Elementary, where a major aim was to improve the writing of students with widely diverse learning disabilities. Consistent with the elementary language arts curriculum for her district, Sue would be centering her writing instruction around a folder-to-portfolio system that allowed her students to write in a variety of genres and looked toward the new state-level writing assessment for fifth graders as a major measure of her program's quality. Jennifer was working at nearby Simpson Middle School, where she would be teaching eighth-grade language arts using a county-mandated curriculum that called for increased emphasis on spelling and vocabulary instruction (with spelling to have a separate report-card grade). This curriculum also called for teachers to begin using writing folders with multiple revisions of student texts toward year-end portfolios to help the middle schoolers take more control over their own assessment. Like Sue, Jennifer was well aware of the state-level writing test for her grade level, which asked students to write a personal narrative that is scored like the elementary instrument. Sarah, meanwhile, was teaching an integrated English/language arts methods course that included a six-week on-campus component, meeting twelve hours per week, followed by four weeks when students were assigned to a high school classroom three hours per day. Since a major focus of Sarah's course would be to help her students consider how to develop an effective writing program in their own teaching, the class members would try out and evaluate a wide variety of writing assignments. They would also continually reassess their own texts, both through peer response and individual reflective writing, and then assemble a course portfolio which included work from the on-campus and in-school portions of the class. Although Sarah's students had already successfully passed the Georgia Regents' Test of writing ability required of undergraduates in the state, they still faced the TCT (Teacher Certification Test), an exam of their knowledge of "English" as their teaching subject, which included questions to check their writing ability and their understanding of writing process pedagogy.

As our research project was about to begin, each of us tried to make certain that our experiment would support, rather than under-

mine, the context-specific writing instruction goals of our distinctive teaching sites—even those we might not have chosen if left to our own devices. (This concern about ethical considerations faced in classroom research also led us to frame separate research questions for each of our sites and to inform our students and administrators fully about the specific goals and strategies we had in mind for the project.) Starting with the broad "wonderings" we had generated together, we each outlined classroom-level research questions as well. The following excerpts, taken from reflective writing we did during the project, are descriptions of those questions and the early implementation of the pen-pal research in our respective classrooms. Re-viewing such memos now, we can see how this writing-for-research learning reflects both similarities and differences in the ways we incorporated the ungraded texts from this cross-level enterprise into our overall writing programs:

Sue

In particular, I wanted to answer the following questions: (1) Will the students be more enthusiastic about writing? (2) How will the quality of their writing change with regard to handwriting, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization? (3) Will there be a change in the level of detail and content of their writing? . . .

When school began in the fall, I explained to my students, in our get-acquainted process, that the main focus of my summer had been the Writing Project. I had made some wonderful new friends, and I wanted to stay in touch with them during the school year. One of the teachers I felt especially close to was Mrs. Jennifer Herrod. Mrs. Herrod, I told the students, taught at Simpson Middle School, just a few minutes away from our school. . . . I explained that I would very much like for our class to write to Mrs. Herrod's class, and after we had established a relationship with our pen pals, I would like to go to Simpson for a short visit. My students were very excited about the possibility and wanted to write immediately.

[Preparing to start] the first exchange brought out all of the insecurities of my students about their writing. They asked me questions such as, what should I write about? Who should I write to? How should I begin my letter? I decided to take my students all the way back and begin with a friendly letter format and the parts of a letter. I modeled what I would write in a letter to Mrs. Herrod. Using the overhead projector, I thought aloud while my students "listened in." I was surprised how little letter writing experience the majority of my students had had. Besides their apprehension of writing in general, they were unsure to whom their letters should be addressed. We decided

as a group to use the "Dear Pen Pal" greeting for this first exchange. I explained that once our letters were received, our pen pals would know our names and be able to address us more personally....Again, through a whole-group discussion, we decided that the letter should serve to introduce each of us to whoever received our personal letter. We decided that the contents should be general. Questions about what the eighth grade was like, or what they were studying, would be good topics because people usually like to talk about themselves.

Revisiting Sue's research memo now, we are struck by the complex writing issues her students started considering as this ungraded writing experience began, and by how closely their student-centered concerns matched Sue's own research questions. Their immediate queries about who to write to suggested an awareness of audience that might not generally be attributed to fourth graders and offered a tentative answer to her first question about enthusiasm for this writing task. Although "the first exchange brought out all of the insecurities ...[her] students [had] about their writing," her class was still "very excited" about beginning the project "and wanted to write immediately." Meanwhile, Sue's strategy of modeling a first letter on the overhead, thinking aloud and *along with* her students, helped set the stage for her third research question, as she demonstrated for them the way that the "detail and content of their writing" in this case could be dialogically shaped by both what they wrote and what they received back. At the same time, in focusing initially on content rather than on "handwriting, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization," Sue signaled to her students that in crafting a writing product, they need not be overly concerned with correctness issues early on. Nonetheless, by tackling the question about "to whom their letters should be addressed" as soon as it was raised, and by contextualizing her answer within the lesson about the friendly letter, Sue stressed the close relationship between content and form so that as they experienced an authentic writing task, her students were beginning to explore the multilayered aspects of genre formation. After all, while the "Dear Pen Pal" greeting fit a "correct" standard for opening letters which had been set outside their classroom, this specific variation also showed the students that they were part of a particular writing community that could establish nuanced adaptations of "rules" unique to their own group.

Though Jennifer's and Sue's specific research questions were quite similar, curricular concerns linked to her middle school setting led Jennifer to some notable variations in the issues she studied with

her students through the ungraded letter writing and in the instructional strategies she employed for integrating the project into her overall writing curriculum:

Jennifer

I wondered: "What effect will cross-age pen-pal writing, consistent writing for a real purpose, have on my eighth graders' writing?" More specifically, I wanted to answer the following questions: (1) How will the students' affective feelings about writing change? (2) How will the complexity and appropriateness of their grammar and punctuation change? (3) How will the level of detail and complexity in style, content, organization, and sentence structure change? (4) What changes will I see in their higher-order thinking skills and metacognition in regard to writing? (5) How will the letters to the two different audiences (elementary versus college students) differ? . . .

I chose my second-period class to be pen pals to both groups of students. I based this decision upon several reasons. The class was my smallest (22 students as opposed to 29 or 30), and the time of day our class met would coordinate best with possible visitations from Sue's and Sarah's classes. Also, this class was a particularly cooperative and insightful group, and using the same group of students to write to both classes would allow us to compare their writing intended for two distinct audiences. I introduced the idea to my students after I had already inundated them with stories about my involvement in the summer institute. The institute had a profoundly positive effect on me, and I couldn't help but share with my students stories of the writing and learning I had participated in. We read an essay by the young adult science fiction author Ursula Leguin, "Thinking about Writing," and I spent several days talking with my students about writers' purposes, audiences, and products. I introduced the pen-pal idea very generally, explaining that it would be fun, would give them an opportunity to improve their writing by writing to a real audience for a real purpose, and would also improve the fourth graders' writing and would help the college students become better teachers. . . .

My students had an opportunity to meet Sarah's in person when her class visited mine to observe....It was interesting to Sarah and me that her students seemed to gravitate toward students of mine with similar personality characteristics. After talking for ten minutes or so, the college students departed, and mine were free to talk about...the project. They were excited at the idea of having pen pals, but anxious about embarking on a new experience.

Jennifer's question about the possible "affective" impact of the project on her students paralleled Sue's wondering if composing the

letters might make her students "more enthusiastic about writing." Similarly, Jennifer's second and third questions matched the content of Sue's, while allowing for more complex, specific instructional objectives for content development and surface editing at the middle school level. But Jennifer also had two other research questions geared to her classroom. Her exploration of ways to promote "higher-order thinking skills and metacognition" through the project reflected her awareness of her school's site-based teaching goals for the year. Also, her wish to have her students learn to adapt their writing to "two different audiences" was consistent with the state middle school curriculum guide and the Georgia eighth-grade writing assessment instrument's stress on writing for a variety of audiences.

Also like Sue, and in line with the experiential learning they'd shared at the summer institute, Jennifer contextualized the particular "fun" composing task of letter writing within a frame which invited her class to explore several key concepts that would carry over into much of their other writing—in and out of school. Thus, Leguin's essay was a way of underscoring the links between thinking and writing that they would continue to study through ongoing critique of their letter writing processes; especially since Jennifer planned to have her students both discuss (as in Sue's class) and write written reflections about their work for the project. Similarly, in suggesting to her class that participation in the project would allow them to teach both elementary students and adults (i.e., "it would...improve the fourth graders' writing and would help the college students become better teachers..."), Jennifer signaled to her students that this ungraded writing could have a serious social purpose well beyond the typical, limited goal of fulfilling an assignment and getting a grade.

Sarah's research questions and initial teaching strategies for the project were also tailored to her students' site- and program-specific learning needs:

Sarah

Because my class was made up of students on their way to being teachers, I was eager for the project to serve a dual purpose. I wanted my students to be able to reflect on their own writing and the way it's shaped by different contexts of past and current experience—for example, to consider what the "school" audience for writing is usually like, and how that pattern of single-teacher-reader may have affected their own academic and personal writing....But I also wanted them to use the letter writing project to explore issues related to their upcoming *teaching* of writing. Along those lines, the main questions I wanted us to

address combined writing-centered and teaching-centered con-
cerns: (1) How does audience affect writing, and how can we
provide a variety of real audiences for our students' writings?
(2) How does repeatedly writing to the same audience shape
writing, and what are the implications of sustained writer/
audience relationships for classroom writing programs? (3)
How does an understanding of genre shape writing? For exam-
ple, what effect does guided exposure to models have on writ-
ing? How can/should teacher modeling and instruction in
genre be used to support student writing? (4) How might texts
be shaped by collaborative reflection on a particular writing
process? Assuming that individual and/or group reflection of
this kind might help writers, how can teachers provide oppor-
tunities for students to reflect upon writing as a social practice?
(5) What is the role of "correctness" in writing? For school? In
other sites? How can writing for authentic purposes support the
learning of correct spelling, punctuation, and usage?

We first wrote to other students involved in the project after
our visit to Jennifer's school. I was interested when, during
class the next day, several of my students said they were a little
worried about writing a letter the middle schoolers would *want*
to answer. We used that comment as a springboard for a discus-
sion of audience, focusing for awhile on Bakhtin's conceptions
of dialogue. We discussed ways of building on what the eighth
graders had said during our visit to make each of our letters
unique. We then spent a good deal of time on what seemed at
first to be a trivial issue, but turned out to be quite productive:
whether my students should sign their own first names or the
more "teacherly" first and last names. This question led us to
discuss several issues, including modeling, the effect of hierar-
chies on writing relationships, and ways my students' own
transitional identities affected their writing.

Rereading Sarah's reflections on the early stages of the project,
we can see that some of her critique of writing processes with her stu-
dents was more explicitly theoretical and centered around pedagogy
(versus writing itself) than the talks in Sue's and Jennifer's classes.
Nonetheless, in the major questions to be explored, if not in the exact
vocabulary used, there may have been at least as many similarities as
differences across our three research sites. All of us were intrigued by
questions about audience, the effects of social composing on text, and
the relative importance of correctness and other kinds of standardiza-
tion in writing communities' work.

By critiquing their writing processes for the letters, like Sue's
and Jennifer's classes, the college students themselves continued to
call attention to worthwhile issues for the whole group to consider. As

noted, an especially fruitful phase of our work was the start-up of correspondence. Sure enough, brief freewrites—typed in the computer lab on the day they turned in their letters for the middle schoolers— not only described the college students' at-home composing steps as initially requested, but a quick rereading of their own and others' reflections also encouraged them to propose topics for whole-class discussion stemming from the problems, questions, and observations they saw in more than one reflection. These reflections on their own letter writing, like the reflections Jennifer's students and we three teachers composed for the project, were obviously ungraded as well. In a sense, then, our project made use of rather complicated layers of ungraded writing—including ungraded student writing to assess ungraded student writing.

As revealed in their reflections, one difficulty the students had faced was making their two letters distinctive from each other. (Each methods class member wrote to two eighth graders.) Besides noting some of the various strategies they had used (e.g., different stationery, sealing the first envelope after writing the first letter to discourage copying), we also discussed why it had seemed important to diversify. We noticed, in addition, that several students had trouble deciding how carefully to proofread their letters. On the one hand, Deborah had commented in her freewrite that she "started off writing on a separate sheet of paper so that if I made a mistake, I could correct it." But she quickly reconsidered: "After the first several sentences, I decided that this was a waste of my time and that I should just write. After all, isn't this what letters are for? I don't prewrite when I write my parents or friends." On the other hand, while Deborah's comments suggest she was constructing herself as a friendly peer correspondent, Yvonne's description, when reconsidered by the group during our critique time, seemed to represent more of a teacher-as-modeler conception of her writing task. After all, she had explained in her freewrite that she felt she needed to write "a rough draft" of her first letter, then move to "revising" and recopying, and that she had "tried to sound as friendly and sympathetic as possible" without "sounding overly chummy." Contrasting Deborah's and Yvonne's decisions helped us to discuss the authorial stance for a "friendly" letter written to a middle schooler by an adult who was, and yet was not exactly, a teacher figure. Some students speculated that the eighth graders might share the letters they received with their parents, and thus they worried that that potential audience might be put off by surface errors rather than seeing the texts as calculatedly informal. Significantly, even those who

argued that they had purposely tried to avoid seeming too teacher-like realized that, as initiators of the letter-exchange process, their texts might be more effective if prepared as models of conversational writing. Along those lines, another student's freewrite was representative of the class members' concerted efforts to invite response:

> I tried to remember who I was writing to....I wanted to make the letter personal and warm so that they would feel more comfortable opening up to me, when they wrote back. So I used more of a conversational type of language than a formal one. I first wanted to provide some background information about myself in hopes that they might do the same in their letter. After that, I asked them questions about what their view of a good teacher is and what was their favorite teacher like. I basically wanted the letter to be a kind of starting point.

Apparently, this set of letters provided a positive "starting point" indeed, as Jennifer reported later that more than one student had sent in a reply though absent from school on the day the responses were due. In the meantime, like Sarah and Sue, she had devoted some productive class time to discussing the writing process for the first letters the eighth graders would write. The coincidence of having received letters on the same day from both their younger and their older pen pals may have promoted many of their insights, and Jennifer was impressed by the way her class used comparisons and contrasts between the college and elementary letters to examine together several issues related to their own response writing. One of the first differences several class members noticed was that the college letters were "more personal" than the elementary ones, and after a brief listing of some examples, she and her students surmised that one reason might be that the college students had already met them and could refer to topics discussed during their recent visit. Since the ones from Sue's students were addressed simply "Dear Pen Pal," Jennifer let each of her students randomly select one. The eighth graders enthusiastically read these letters, with many describing them as "funny" or "cute" while sharing them with each other, often working together to decode some of the "creative" spelling. Commenting on the relatively "simple" vocabulary and sentence structure of their mail, the eighth graders discussed how they could adapt their usual writing voices to respond effectively to the younger writers. In considering together some topics to be included in their letters, the middle schoolers pointed out comments about hobbies and school interests and dislikes which appeared in some of the younger students' writing. Other

issues that class members discussed prior to writing back included one student's suggestion that they all print rather than write in cursive, and another's proposal that they limit the length of their letters to match the approximate length of what they'd received.

Interestingly, while the college letters were addressed to particular, named correspondents and, as noted above, to more "personal" topics, almost all of them also included elements the middle schoolers judged to be more school-centered, such as questions about how to be a good English teacher (and specifically how to teach writing effectively), suggestions for books that should be taught in secondary courses, and queries about positive and negative experiences the eighth graders remembered from their schooling. Though she pointed out that some of the common topics in these letters might be more the result of all the authors preparing to student teach soon, Jennifer also began to introduce concepts related to reading and writing communities, and she speculated with her class about the kinds of genre-shaping talks the college writers might have had *as a class* before composing their letters.

Overall, the middle schoolers were eager to write back to both their elementary and their college correspondents. Most took advantage of class time to compose their responses to the younger writers, but they worked on their letters to the methods class students at home, where they could access stationery and spend more time preparing far longer letters to mirror what they'd received from the older writers. This careful attention to the physical appearance of their letters to the adults was expressed not just in efforts to write neatly and/or use personal stationery instead of notebook paper, as the elementary school students had done. From their first exchanges, the eighth graders also mimicked, following the college models (Randolph, Robbins, and Gere), such diverse techniques for embellishing, and thereby further individualizing, the physical text itself as adding drawings, stickers, or stamps; varying the look of their cursive and handwritten lettering for emphasis; playing with margins and text placement on the page; and enclosing letters in envelopes. (Interestingly, these attentions to textual presentation soon spilled over into the middle-to-elementary school exchanges as well; see Figures 1a and 1b.)

From the beginning of the project, we three teachers had explained that we would never be grading the letters, and that any student who wished to keep the correspondence private could do so. We had decided that sending the message that some school-based writing could be private was important, so that having received parent

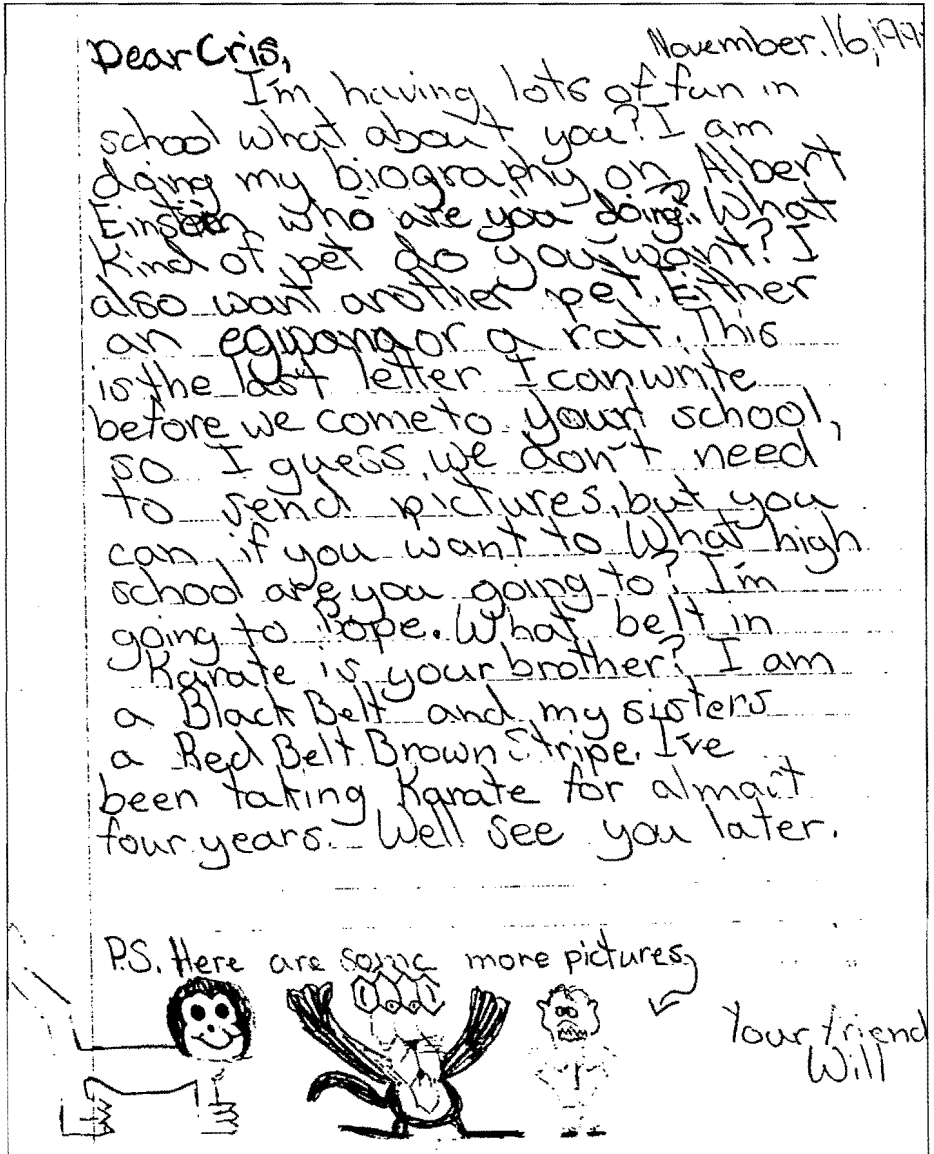**Figure 1a.** Will's attention to textual presentation.

permission for the K–12 students to participate, and having held class discussions about appropriate content, we could risk not censoring letters. None of our students disappointed us in this regard. Along those lines, Jennifer did not screen the letters before sending them. She did give her students time to read each other's, if they liked, and to make
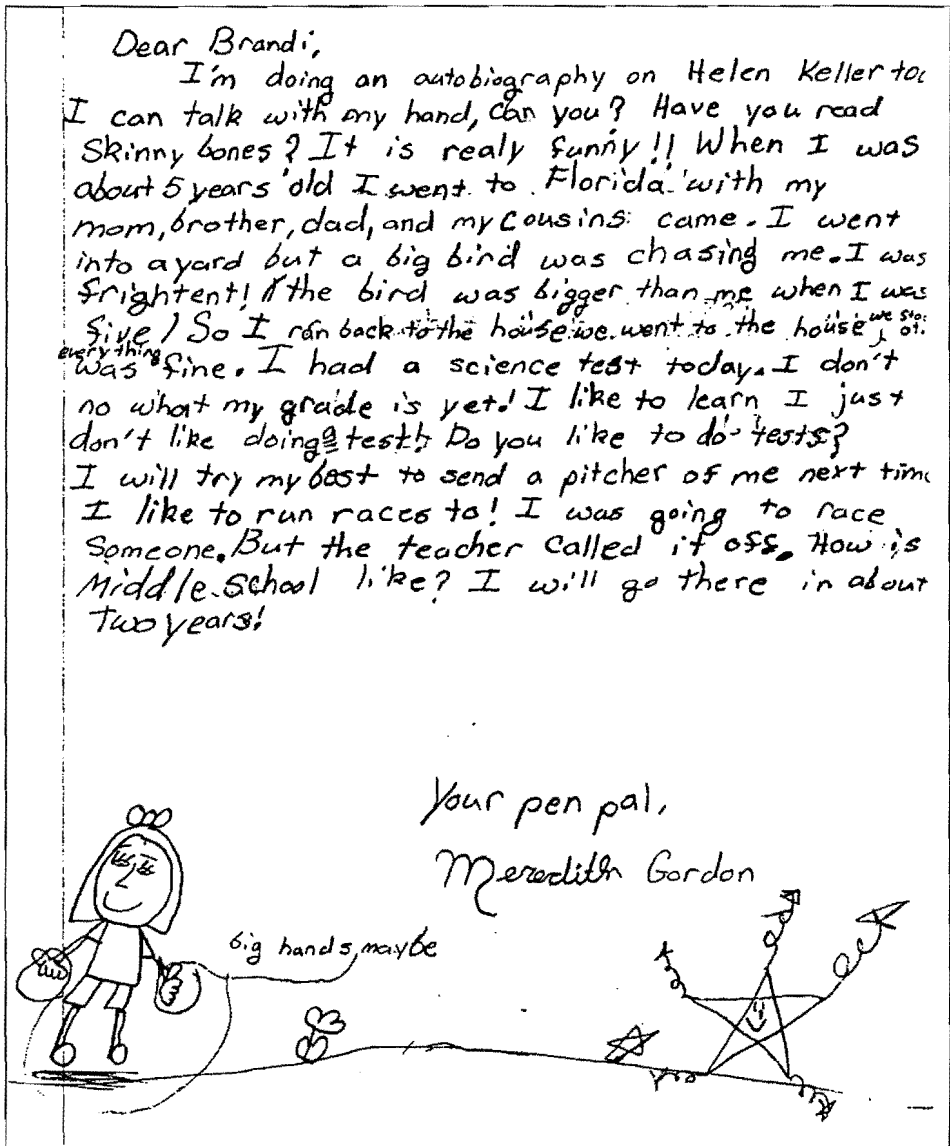
Dear Brandi,
I'm doing an autobiography on Helen Keller to.
I can talk with my hand, can you? Have you read
Skinny bones? It is realy funny!! When I was
about 5 years old I went to Florida with my
mom, brother, dad, and my cousins came. I went
into a yard but a big bird was chasing me. I was
frightent! the bird was bigger than me when I was
five) So I ran back to the house we went to the house we sto.
every thing was fine. I had a science test today. I don't
no what my grade is yet. I like to learn I just
don't like doing tests. Do you like to do tests?
I will try my best to send a pitcher of me next time
I like to run races to! I was going to race
someone. But the teacher called it off. How is
Middle School like? I will go there in about
two years!

Your pen pal,
Meredith Gordon

big hands, maybe

Figure 1b. Meredith's attention to textual presentation.

suggestions for dealing with frequently expressed concerns about
length (usually worries that a draft was too short for college responses
or too long for elementary), handwriting (i.e., legibility), and content
(clarity and interest). Subsequent chances for students to write reflec-
tions on their own writing process—for the two different audiences

and a whole-group debriefing—helped Jennifer see that this dual writing task had prompted her students to consider, in a meaningful context, a number of concepts central to the official eighth-grade writing curriculum of her district and to the state assessment program's goals for middle school writing instruction. She later created several lessons connecting these first letters and the collaborative classroom critique of them to specific elements of the eighth-grade writing-assessment instrument (e.g., composing for a specific audience, developing ideas fully, editing for surface errors), which she knew her students would soon be encountering as part of statewide testing. In other words, though she never graded the letters, Jennifer did use them as points of reference to guide instruction. Noting trends/patterns in the various sets of letters, for example, helped her to draw some inferences about learning needs and interests in that particular class (e.g., specific kinds of recurring spelling problems the students identified themselves when editing their letters, and writing subtasks they seemed to especially enjoy—such as co-writing projects like the serial stories several of them wrote with their college correspondents).

Noticing the popularity of those dialogic writing projects, in fact, helped Jennifer and Sue plan for an effective meeting between the middle school and elementary students later in the year. Adapting a "Magic Monster Activity" presented by one of their writing project fellows at the summer institute, they decided to try having their students respond to that creative writing prompt together during the younger students' visit to the middle school in December. Working in small groups that included representatives from both schools, the students first took turns drawing a series of lines (connecting, intersecting, or scattered), using different colors for each group member. Then they were asked to develop their drawing, turning it into a Magic Monster who could be called upon by the president to rescue astronauts on a mission to outer space. Once the sketch was finished, each group began a story together, telling how their monster would approach the rescue mission. While Jennifer and Sue were pleased to see their groups writing together, even more exciting was the strong student enthusiasm for continuing the stories in back-and-forth form in future letters. We also found it interesting that, in exchanges after this December visit and drawing-to-writing exercise, the middle school and elementary letters tended to make far more frequent and elaborate use of drawings within, around, and at the end of their texts.

That both this particular ungraded writing task and the ongoing letter writing were meaningful and productive for her overall writing

program was quite clear to Sue when she and her students returned to Mountain View that afternoon. After she invited the students to write about their experience meeting their pen pals and visiting the middle school, the room was intensely quiet as they all worked away, and the whole-group sharing of these reflective texts indicated that these very young students were developing understandings of key concepts related to the project (e.g., writing *with* someone and *to* someone as similar, yet different; the effect of writing to a known audience versus an abstract one). They were also, of course, enjoying the experience for its own sake. Especially excited about the continuing exchanges was Siana, who had found a special friend in her middle school correspondent Neha. Away from the letter writing project, Siana had been the class's least communicative student, so Sue was at first surprised to hear her ask if she could write an "extra" letter to her pen pal. However, once Siana explained that Neha was also a recent immigrant and commented that they had a lot to write about to each other, Sue reminded herself that ungraded writing can simultaneously serve many worthwhile purposes—not all of them reflected easily in official lists of curricular objectives.

Nonetheless, like Jennifer with her classwork on the state writing assessment, Sue also found that traditional school tasks could acquire a new life with the support of ungraded writing. Later in the year, when a batch of letters from Simpson asked questions about another assigned writing task the middle schoolers were beginning and also solicited practical help from the elementary group, Sue's class could hardly wait to oblige. The eighth graders were preparing to write children's books, complete with illustrations as well as narratives. Surveyed about their favorite books and asked for tips for creating a "good" story for young readers, the elementary school correspondents not only reminisced in return letters about familiar, beloved stories, they also went to the library to find titles and details from sample "old favorites," thereby doing group research to identify traits of a genre that—until then—they'd taken for granted.

Evaluating Our Classroom-Based Study of Ungraded Writing

What advantages to using ungraded writing in school emerged from our work? First of all, we found that, partly because the project allowed our students great flexibility in their letters' content and style, we were often able to draw upon samples from their work to address

curricular goals during mini-lessons. It seemed that whatever a partic-
ular day's or week's instructional focus was, we were easily able to
find an appropriate student text to serve as a model or to provide an
example of a particular problem/error we wanted to illustrate. In
Sue's and Jennifer's classes, especially, the state's standardized writing
assessments for fifth and eight grades have been crucial shapers of the
school district's specific instructional goals for upper-elementary and
middle school writing. At both the elementary and middle school lev-
els, that test calls for students to produce a single timed-writing text,
which is evaluated by trained scorers who judge it according to sev-
eral criteria—topic elaboration, audience awareness, use of language,
and surface-editing skills—to rank the author somewhere along a con-
tinuum of "emerging writer" [stage one] to "extending writer" [stage
six]. Significantly, we believe, Jennifer and Sue were both able to use
their students' letter writing for multiple lessons aimed at various ele-
ments in that standardized assessment (e.g., audience shaping content,
editing for usage). So, our ungraded writing actually supported,
rather than impeded, the learning of traditional basic writing skills.

One potential problem some naysayers had mentioned before
we began did not, in fact, materialize. Although having the letters
remain ungraded might have been expected to encourage our students
not to take their project-related writing tasks seriously, all of them
expressed in their oral and written reflections (and in the letters them-
selves) a high degree of commitment to doing their best work. In some
cases, in fact, students at all three participating sites at times put more
effort into their letter writing than into their regular school-based,
graded writing. We might argue that this tendency rebuts the idea that
students won't perform unless they receive a score for each product.
But we're hesitant to overgeneralize on the basis of this single and, we
realize, very informal experiment. We're also hesitant to overgeneral-
ize about our students' ability to accept without complaint or apparent
discomfort the fact that, in Sarah's and Jennifer's classes, some graded
writing products also had to be prepared. Specifically, Sarah used a
number of assignments in her methods class to allow students chances
to try out various formative and summative evaluation techniques,
such as preparing and self-scoring a rubric for I-Search papers. There-
fore, throughout the quarter, the students were producing many
ungraded pieces—e.g., informal reflections on reading composed in
the computer classroom, descriptions of school-site visits, and daily
lesson plans—as well as a range of texts they graded for themselves
and each other, and a few which Sarah graded using a variety of sum-

mative systems. Perhaps because they saw practical advantages to trying out so many models, the students said they appreciated the chance to have both graded and ungraded writing within the same program, rather than finding this blend disjunctive. Similarly, despite their enthusiasm for the project's letter writing, the eighth graders did not question why some of their other pieces had to be scored. Sophisticated already about the necessity their teacher faced of having to report a grade for them, they realized that graded papers had to be a part of their school experience as long as Jennifer had to represent their work with a symbol on a computer printout every few weeks. Here, as in other aspects of the project, we may have been blessed with unusually amenable students, but we were still impressed with their ability to accommodate both graded and ungraded writing as part of one program.

Nonetheless, our enthusiasm for the results of this project should not obscure its very real limitations. Both the personal and the more traditional academic gains made by our students might well be difficult for those outside the context of our shared learning to appreciate or even, in some cases, to see. One of the lessons we three collaborating teachers have learned from this study is that assessment of sustained student writing is so highly contextualized that we need to develop new and complex ways of reporting our student progress (Flinders and Eisner). For instance, one exchange series—between Sasha and Erin—documents a positive answer to Sue's question about whether letter writing could help her students produce longer and more audience-aware texts; for Sasha began the year as a reluctant writer but, through her letters to Erin, gained confidence and skills (see Figures 2a and 2b).

Eager as we are to provide examples of such productive ungraded writing from our classrooms, we're also well aware that the samples, on their own, can be deceptive. How, for instance, would a reader who didn't know the context of Neha's and Siana's recent immigration experiences evaluate their letters? For us, though, the scattered surface errors in Neha's December note to Siana are much less significant markers of that text's meaning and value than her sensitive efforts to praise her younger immigrant counterpart, respond to one picture with another, and invite more letters (see Figure 3.)

Similarly, many readers might note how middle schoolers Neha and Erin both quickly imitated some aspects of college student Donna's early letters. For example, after receiving a note from Donna which began with the salutation "Hi! What's up?" Neha responded by

Figure 2a. Sasha's first letter to Erin.

using the same opener for her first letter back to her older pen pal. Neha also organized the body of her letter to match the content and order of Donna's, answering, in careful sequence, each of several questions Donna had posed. While any reader would probably see those parallels, equally significant for us would be the more subtle evidence of growth in Neha's subsequent letters to Donna. Over time, these exchanges seem to have promoted greater self-confidence, fluency, and experimentation with a more relaxed personal voice than a red pen and grade applied to Neha's early effort might have. And, we believe, a key factor promoting Neha's developing writing abilities over the course of the project was the supportive voice Donna was able to assume in her responses to the eighth grader's writing. Donna frequently represented herself rhetorically as beginning to assume the identity of a teacher (e.g., "Have you had many teachers who did activities outside?...I'd like to know because I would love to have some classes outside!"). Yet her comments *about Neha's texts* focused
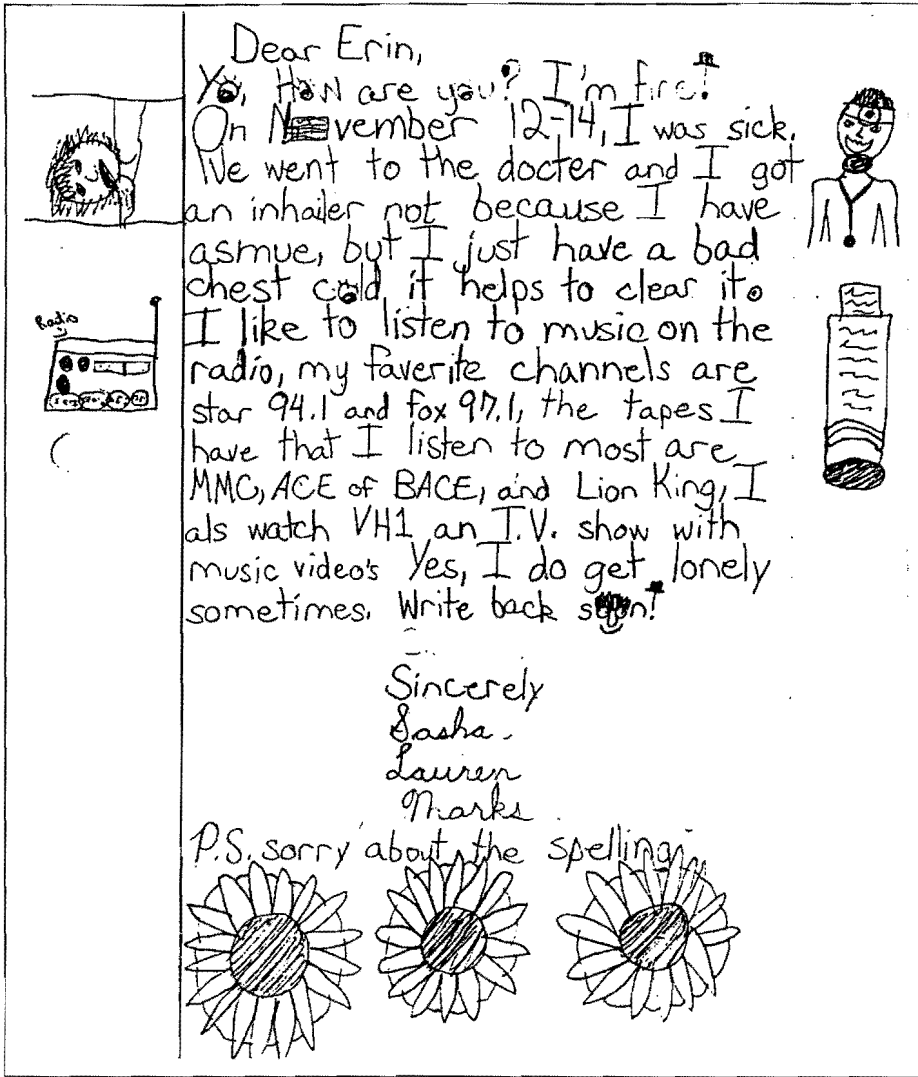
Dear Erin,
Yo, How are you? I'm fine!
On November 12-14, I was sick.
We went to the docter and I got
an inhaler not because I have
asmue, but I just have a bad
chest cold, it helps to clear it.
I like to listen to music on the
radio, my faverite channels are
star 94.1 and fox 97.1, the tapes I
have that I listen to most are
MMC, ACE of BACE, and Lion King, I
als watch VH1 an T.V. show with
music video's Yes, I do get lonely
sometimes. Write back soon!

Sincerely
Sasha
Lauren
Marks
P.S. sorry about the spelling.

Figure 2b. Sasha's later letters to Erin are longer and more audience aware.

on encouraging more thinking, writing, and sharing of ideas rather than on correcting "faults" in the younger girl's letters. For instance, she begins one response to Neha by saying:

> I was SO excited about getting your letter! I have to say thank you for answering all of the questions I asked you, and thank you also for giving me titles of books. I want to have a library in my classroom, and thanks to you—I can add a few more titles to
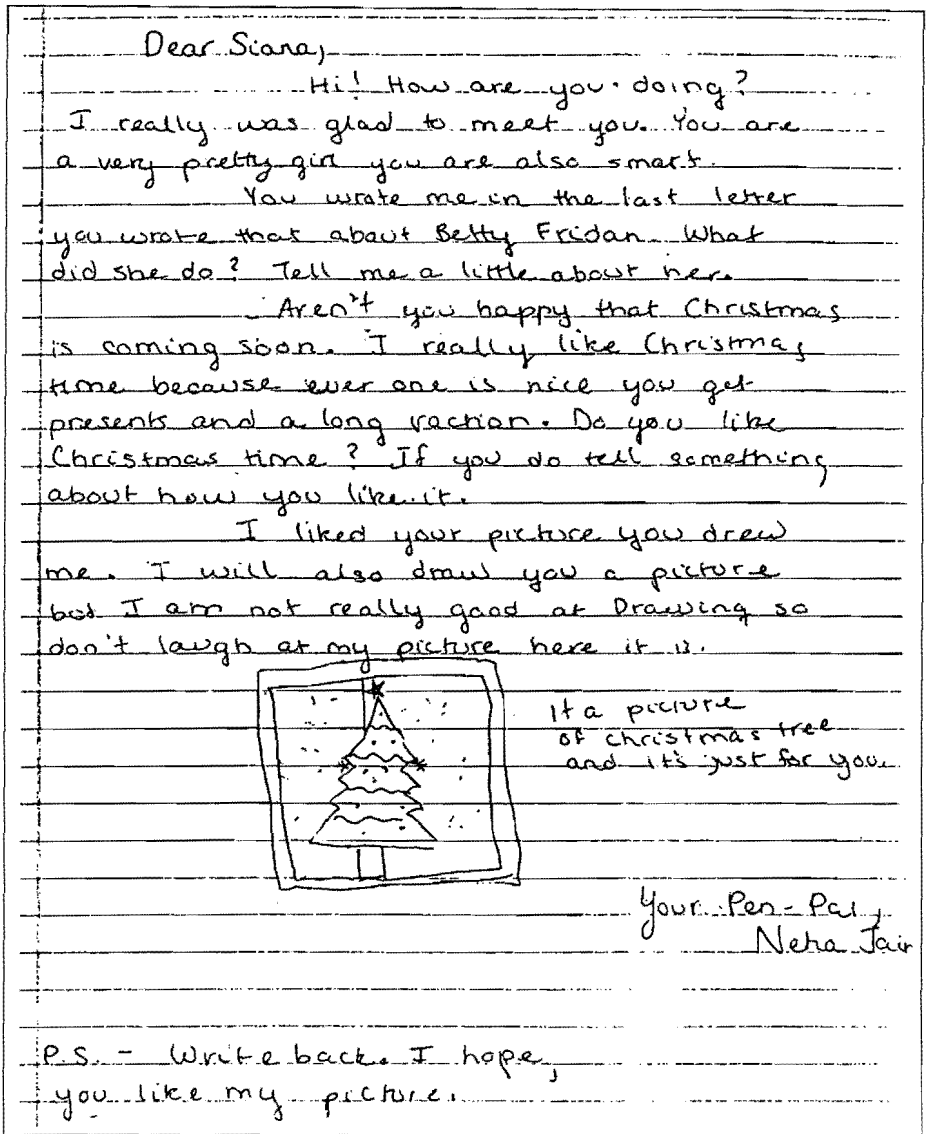
Dear Siara,

Hi! How are you doing?

I really was glad to meet you. You are a very pretty girl you are also smart.

You wrote me in the last letter you wrote that about Betty Fridan. What did she do? Tell me a little about her.

Aren't you happy that Christmas is coming soon. I really like Christmas time because ever one is nice you get presents and a long vaction. Do you like Christmas time? If you do tell something about how you like it.

I liked your picture you drew me. I will also draw you a picture but I am not really good at Drawing so don't laugh at my picture here it is.

It a picture of christmas tree and it's just for you.

Your Pen-Pal,
Neha Jair

P.S. - Write back. I hope, you like my picture.

Figure 3. Neha's letter to Siara.

my collection! It was funny that you mentioned R. L. Stine, because almost every student I have spoken to says Stine is really good.

Along those same lines, perhaps any casual reader would value the clear parallels between college student Emmanuel's sharing of

drawings from his syndicated cartoon strip with a middle school pen pal and her pictures responding back. After all, who wouldn't stop to enjoy the clever samples of Emmanuel's "Sibling Revelry" strip, which he enclosed with his first letters, along with a funny explanation of how cartooning and English teaching go together? And who could fail to appreciate Dara's clever visual reply at the end of her first letter back, where she drew her own distinctive character and dubbed it "Potpourri the Cat"? But could a hurried school official—one used to scanning assessment reports that can be tightly graphed in quantitative scores—also be counted on to read several later letters? Could an administrator appreciate the way Dara then followed Emmanuel's lead even further when she began to make similar use of pictures in her letters to her elementary school correspondent, who in turn adopted the same technique for embellishing his letters back? What does this seemingly simple, shared composing process say about discourse communities, genre development, relationships between verbal and pictorial texts, and links between individual and group audiences? How, in other words, can we classroom teachers find adequate time and expertise to report and interpret such "data" from our research on ungraded writing in ways that will honor the complexity of these learning experiences?

Finally, as our essay title suggests, the conversations and informal written reflections that were a part of this project may have been at least as important as the letters themselves (Kearns). The shared critique of our writing processes, both within and across our various classrooms, helped all of us shift our rationale for assessing writing away from scoring it for a specific grade to collaboratively evaluating and assessing it in terms of ongoing learning goals (Schwartz). But there are still few reporting opportunities available for teachers to share such "results" of their work on ungraded writing with high-level curricular decision makers. We hope our essay and the others in this collection represent a good start.

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Interlude

Grades interfere with my ability to teach. What I want students to do is to try new things, to take risks, to do things that stretch them and push them. But they're too afraid of making mistakes and getting a bad grade, so they resist my attempts to push them beyond their comfort level.

I've tried to relieve this anxiety by assuring them that if they do the things that I suggest, they will earn a B in the class, which is, to tell the truth, what most of my college students are seeking. I try to make criteria very clear, but I also ask students to talk with me when they have alternative approaches to assignments. I also try to model openness and flexibility in the classroom so that they can come to trust me. I have to go through all sorts of gyrations to establish my credibility as a teacher/evaluator/coach, to show that I'm flexible, that I won't just invite them to experiment and then nail them with a bad grade.

Grades interfere with my ability to teach.

— Suzy Shumway
   Prescola University