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People, Places and Ideas: A Year-long Conversation with Rural Alaskan Students

Lauren McClanahan

Western Washington University, mcclanl@wwu.edu

Andrea Gabler

Western Washington University

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WRITING COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY FELLOWSHIPS
Closing Write-up 2007-08

Researchers/Department: Lauren McClanahan; Andrea Gabler

Title: People, Places and Ideas: A Year-long Conversation with Rural Alaskan Students

Research Question: How can developing strong writing prompts elicit strong student responses concerning the evidence of climate change in a rural Alaskan fishing village?

Method: For this case study, my pre-service secondary teacher education students were paired (via e-mail) with middle school students in rural southwestern Alaska. The Alaskan students were from the small fishing village of Eek, which has a population of approximately 280. Through a process of continual refinement, my secondary education students drafted and revised writing prompts that encouraged the Alaskan students to think in terms of how climate change is changing their way of life.

Key Findings: By far, the greatest finding of this study was that it is not easy to design an effective writing prompt. The first drafts of my students prompts, while on the right track, were generally far too vague. For example, one student asked his middle school partner, “What does climate change mean to you?” Well, frankly, not much! The teacher with whom we worked in Alaska suggested narrowing the question down, and possibly asking several smaller questions to get to the gist of the topic. So, rather than ask, “What does climate change mean to you?” my student wrote “Can you think of an example of how the warmer weather has affected the fishing conditions in your village?” By narrowing the topic a bit, and providing a direction for the middle school student to take in her reply, the reply was far more detailed than it might have been before. By thinking in terms of how fishing (specifically) is affected, the Alaskan student could speak directly to the amount of time it takes for the rivers and ocean to freeze—and how long that freeze lasts compared to a generation ago.

Another key finding centered around involving the family and community. For many of my students, their prompts had a family/community component. Several students asked their Alaskan partners to conduct short interviews with parents or community elders. These interviews focused on changing climate patterns over a generation or two. One of the teacher education standards for Washington State asks teachers to actively involve parents and the community in their lessons. Having K-12 students conduct simple interviews is one way for the parents to become involved with their child’s education.

Implications for Further Study: Ideally, a partnership like the one described above would last for the entire school year, and not just two or three exchanges. An extension of this study would be to partner WWU pre-service teachers and rural Alaskan students in the fall, and begin these writing prompt exchanges early, encompassing a variety of topics. That way, relationships would have time to blossom, and conversations could become more in-depth, due to having a greater amount of time to spend “talking” with one another.

Implications for Teaching and Learning: The main implication for teaching and learning, especially when it comes to the preparation of new teachers, is that teaching is an apprenticeship profession. While it is possible to learn a great deal from books and lectures, the most meaningful learning comes from doing. My student co-researcher, Andrea, found this to be the case. In a summary report to me, Andrea stated the following:

Although I was not quite sure what to expect when I joined the Alaska Project in the fall, I did not anticipate being moved so deeply by the experience and its implications for my future as a teacher. I feel prepared to address these issues of writing and climate change concerns in my science classroom while promoting electronic peer interaction and global awareness. Because the

permafrost is beginning to melt and is affecting migratory patterns of wildlife, one of our projects involved designing a prompt to elicit our partners' perceptions of environmental climate change in rural Alaska. Global warming clearly has immediate implications for a community that depends on fishing and hunting for its livelihood, and the thought I put into the development of a prompt led to me to realize that the rural village in which my partner lives will be one of the first communities affected by the actions of individuals living thousands of miles away. It hardly seems fair that the population in Eek, Alaska will have to change their traditional hunting and fishing lifestyle as a result of the over consumption and lack of concern for the environment on the part of industrialized nations and prosperous regions. Such awareness is fodder for meaningful interaction and investigation in local classrooms, and provides a valuable opportunity not only for peer-peer virtual conversations, but for increasing global awareness and developing global through the integration and science and other disciplines within the field of sustainability. My work in the Alaska project has generated a wealth of ideas for incorporating interdisciplinary studies of the environment and the trickle-down effects of global climate change on the social structures and economic disparities of communities worldwide. What could be more valuable than fostering a sense of social and environmental responsibility in our students?