

## The Ultimate Hat Trick: Using E-mail to Connect Writing, Culture and Students

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Teachers have always been asked to wear many hats, simultaneously acting as instructors, counselors, mentors, and friends. Couple this with the fact that in many states, standardized tests are driving the curriculum. As a result, teachers are under more pressure than ever to produce quantifiable results. How, then, among all of the other expectations placed upon classroom teachers can they be expected to improve writing, incorporate technology, and make multiculturalism a focus of their pedagogy? While much research has been conducted to illustrate the importance of each of those aspects of education, little has been written that demonstrates how, in a practical and effective way, teachers can weave writing, technology, and multiculturalism throughout their curriculum. The project described here illustrates how all of these items can be addressed by using a very simple premise and a very easy technology.

### **Writing Assessment: Creating a Common Language**

At Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington, students enrolled in the Woodring College of Education are required to take a course entitled “Developmental Reading, Writing and Learning in the Secondary School.” In this course, students from all content areas learn that *every* teacher is a teacher of reading and writing. One of the cornerstones of the course is understanding how to respond to student writing. Fortunately, teachers in Washington State use a rubric developed by Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. The teachers involved in creating this rubric

wanted a framework from which they could not only assess student writing, but teach it as well—to use assessment to guide instruction. After hundreds of student essays were examined, patterns of what made a piece of writing “good” began to emerge, and from those patterns, six “traits” were distilled. Those traits consist of:

- Ideas/Content (details, development, focus)
- Organization (internal structure)
- Voice (tone, style, purpose, and audience)
- Word Choice (precise language and phrasing)
- Sentence Fluency (correctness, rhythm and cadence)
- Conventions (mechanical correctness)

Once the secondary education students become familiar with the “Six-Trait” model of assessment, it is time to put their knowledge to a practical use. It’s one thing to learn about these traits, and to even have them applied to your own work, but the learning comes in the applying it to the writing of actual secondary students. That’s where the kids from Alaska come in.

### **Using Technology to Bridge Cultural Gaps**

E-mail technology is nothing new. In fact, for many students of all ages, it is simply taken for granted, something they “do” as

part of their daily routine. How, then, could they be encouraged to use a technology that they take for granted and turn it into a powerful learning tool? Because Alaska is a state that also uses the Six-Trait model of writing assessment, it was decided that an exchange with students living there might be beneficial—on two levels. On the first level, they would have a working familiarity with the Six-Traits, and therefore would be good “practice” for the pre-service university students. On the second level, the culture of the Alaskan students was very different from the cultures of the university students, and that was intriguing to everyone.

While attending a conference several years ago, the author was introduced to an administrator from the Lower Kuskokwim School District in Bethel, Alaska. It was decided that the benefits of linking our respective students was a wonderful opportunity for everyone, and so the university students were electronically “introduced” to Tununak, a small fishing village located along the Bering Sea, 519 miles northwest of Anchorage. According to 2000 Census data, Tununak has a population of 325. Of that, 97% are Native American. A traditional Yup’ik Eskimo village, many residents speak both the Yup’ik language as well as English. The school that participated in this project is the only school in the village, housing approximately 100 students ranging from pre-K through grade 12. The students involved with this project ranged from grade 6 to grade 10.

### **The Project**

The first step in this project was making sure that everyone had a partner. Since there were twice as many university students as Alaskan students, each Alaskan student got two university partners. Then, after an initial exchange of personal information (favorite books, movies, songs, family information, etc.), the students from Tununak sent the university students samples of their writing via e-mail. The attachments were sent as Microsoft Word documents so that the university students could make their comments electronically

using either different colored font, or by using the “Insert, Comment” feature. The university students were told to comment on only two traits at a time so as not to overwhelm their Alaskan partners. The university students were then asked to send the corrected papers back, copying in their instructor so class time could be devoted to the problems/practicalities of combining Six-Trait assessment and the electronic domain.

### **Response to Writing: Learning by Doing**

As the university students quickly realized, making coherent, specific comments to help students improve their writing is tricky, especially when it is done from so far away! Having the Six-Trait rubric nearby, however, was helpful. One student had this to say in response to his partner’s work:

I really enjoyed reading your paper. You are very gifted at drawing the reader into your story. I liked how you started with an example of being 30 years old and not having a job...Your voice is very strong! Sentences like, “You’d be sitting out in the streets!” woke me up and made me read more closely.

In another example, an Alaskan student wrote a paper describing snowmobiles. His description of what makes one snowmobile better looking than another, however, fell short. In response, his university partner wrote:

How are [the other snowmobiles] better looking? It is always good to place yourself outside of what you’re writing and act like you have no idea what you writing about. Can you get a visual picture of what you are trying to say? This will help the reader to really get a grasp of the ideas you are trying to describe.

As you can see, the responses of the university students went far beyond the typical “good” or “nice” that many students receive on their papers.

## **Reflections on the Project: Becoming a “Real” Teacher**

When the project came to an end, the university students were asked to respond to their involvement. Overwhelming, they replied that it was beneficial, and that the Six-Trait model of writing assessment made their jobs much easier. One student commented, “The Six-Trait model made my job easier because it gave me specific areas to focus my comments on.” But more importantly than making quality comments, the university students liked the fact that they got to work with “actual” secondary students. “[This project] made me feel really good, because I will have to respond to my own students’ writing someday, and it gave me some practical experience.” A future geography student saw the obvious potential for conducting a similar project in her classroom: “We could exchange writing from specific geographic regions that we are studying.” A science teacher agreed, stating, “Oh yeah! We could do labs simultaneously with other science classes and send reports back and forth.” Many of the university students appreciated to interact with a culture so different from their own. “[The project] was especially cool because the kids were from Alaska—coming from a very different environment/lifestyle. It would be cool, too, if you got in touch with a class from a different country far away, like Iraq.” The potential for application is literally endless.

Clearly, the university students saw the benefits of combining writing, technology and multicultural perspectives. There was a strong sense of pride and collaboration among the students, and class discussions dealing with writing assessment were far more animated than they would have been without the benefit of such a collaboration. So, while teachers are asked to wear many hats throughout the day, this hat actually fits.