**Dear ETAI Short ‘N Sweet Participant,**

I find that students in beginner-level **literature courses** often don’t know how to think about their readings and are even more uncomfortable analyzing a literary work critically when they are asked to write some kind of reflection of what they read. They get stuck! In fact most of us get stuck: “**What do I say?**” “**How do I say it?**” “ **I can’t think of anything to say!**”

I want to suggest the use of **letter-writing** which I believe is an excellent tool to break down those barriers. This task enables students to explore and share their thoughts and responses to what they are reading and what transpires in our lessons together.

Whereas more formal essays can be intimidating, **letter writing** is less formal and by its nature more personal. Dittmer says that “the language of letters is perhaps the closest to natural speech and represents that casual spontaneity we associate with conversation which makes letters a good form of writing to use with reluctant writers”. Using this informal approach, our students can become accustomed to reflecting and discussing.

There is something deeply personal about **letter writing**, such that students find it a fitting venue to ask questions and respond honestly to readings, as if the invisible border that separates student and instructor is removed. Furthermore, the weekly letter-writing assignments, although required, are not graded which relieves pressure and opens students up to explore more freely.

In contrast to the commonly used literature log or journal, **letters** have an audience, even if imagined. Students can take on the persona of whomever they want (for example: themselves, the author [Shakespeare], a character [Miss Brill], a friend, an object or animal [the eagle in Tennyson’s poem]) and address their letter to whomever they want. They have an audience toward whom they direct their thinking and reactions, a format that by its very nature **invites dialogue**. When each week, a student is asked to share his or her letter, the discussions are then prompted by the students’ own interests and debates. Medley claims that “[t]hese letters allow students to enter into a class dialogue and learn more about themselves and other students; thus, they are able to view themselves as part of a **community of learners**”. Though not all students enjoy the assignment, as a general rule letters do become both a vehicle for dialogue and a bonding experience.

This technique Fredericksen and Shafer point out “echoes a **time-honored tradition** of letter writing as a **teaching tool**. Early use of letter writing as a pedagogical device has been traced from second century BCE . . . scholars suggest that from early times an exchange of letters enhanced relationships between tutor and student”.

In my classroom, I advance this aspect further by pairing up students as “**writing partners**” later in the year, as they become more familiar with the task and each other. This way there are more “meeting” spaces in the course between students that don’t generally cross and adding another dimension to our literary exchange. Each student corresponds weekly with another member in the class. Again, they are invited, when letter writing, to pose as anyone or anything. Some partner arrangements are less successful, but for most, there usually develops a regular, friendly exchange as they come to rely on each other for the completion of the task.

**Let’s listen in to what students have to say...**

***Sabreen:****The letter writing idea was incredible! It widened the space of communicating between the students within the class frame. In addition, it helped us with getting to know each other and to learn from each other*.

***Karin:*** *I enjoyed responding to literature through letter writing. I always had something to write about, and always felt free to write about my thoughts and feelings.*

Some students however did have mixed feelings about the task:

***Adi:*** *Writing letters every week was a bit hard for me, but definitely improved my writing. I am grateful for that...I could figure out literature better in pairs...when we moved to the form of responding to each other, it felt better and less difficult.*

Here’s what other students say about “writing partners”

***Nada:*** *Writing letters was my favorite part in this course. I really enjoyed writing to my pair – Miryam – every week. We respond to literature through letter writing, for me it helped me a lot in . . . reviewing the material, what we learned last lesson . . . and to know a great person like Miryam.*

***Nesli:*** *When we were asked to write letters on the first semester I felt that it was good and meaningful because I got a chance to think about what happened in the lesson and to comment on it in some way. . .*

*But, I think the letters in the second semester was more enjoyable and meaningful because I got a chance to discuss what happened in class with another student (who is my friend but usually we don’t speak too much), and to hear what she has to say about the lesson . . .to hear her opinion and to see things from her point of view.*

Though overall positive, it did produce a mix of results.

***Hanan :*** *I find responding to a literature piece through letters a bit challenging because you never know what to write on the first line; not to mention to whom to write, which is more difficult to find. But letter writing in pairs was easier for me. You know who to write to, you know what it is about… You also get to know this person.*

***Or:*** *I didn't like the group writing as much. Answering someone else's letter is a little limiting because you have to write something that's related to what the other person wrote. I liked having the choice of what to write about and what to refer to, when we did it ourselves.*

Naturally with “**writing partners**” it took work to match students. Some partner arrangements however were less successful – where one of the writing partners did not take an equally active role in the relationship which created a frustrating experience for the more conscientious student. For the most part, the pairs developed very successful relationships - being in contact outside of the class on a regular basis working out the technical aspect of the weekly assignment and communicating more. In conclusion . . .

***Kinan says:*** *when you asked us to write letters in the beginning of the semester I didn’t understand the purpose of this action and even when we required to respond to our partner through letters it was so mysterious for me, actually now I can understand . . . I felt that we can share with other students . . . our opinions and position about each story, poem and author that we have learned and discussed them in the class . . . moreover I liked the strategy of working in pairs so we can get to know our partner, his way of thinking, his opinions and how this relates to his culture. בay could not accepts any other culture instead of his original c* אקג ךקשרמןמע t learning litually before start learning li

I have found for my purposes that **letter writing** – individually and then in pairs - is a valuable tool to bring into our joint meeting space. It offered the opportunity to hear the diverse voices and responses to our literary works.

Try it! It may work for you too! And **THANKS** for listening. I would love to get a **letter from you** if you have any questions or you would like to know the sources I used to prepare the background for this letter.

 Sincerely yours,

 Michelle Kinsbursky, Ohalo College - Katzrin

 kins@macam.ac.il