Exploring Literature through Letter Writing Groups

Letter Exchange Medium Options

Paper Documents

Paper letters, whether handwritten or typed, have the advantage of being an accessible option to everyone, regardless of access to computers or the Internet. Disadvantages with this medium are most closely tied to handwritten letters, as it may take students additional time to write out multiple copies of the same letter (at least three for first exchange, with two going to group members and one for the students records or evaluation), and at least two letters for each additional exchange. While it is possible for every student in a group to have access to all the groups' letters (not to respond to but to read), the amount of copying required may make this option prohibitive.

Electronic Documents

To exchange letters as electronic documents, students would type up their letters in a word processor and exchange the files by swapping disks, through email, or through a file server. This option would require students to have access to a computer to compose their letters, which may require time in-class. If using this option, it is of up most importance that compatibility issues among computer platforms (Windows, Macintosh) and software be addressed. The default settings on many of the major word processing programs (Microsoft Word, Microsoft Works, AppleWorks, WordPerfect) are not compatible with each other, and sometimes the default setting of a program is not even compatible with an earlier version of itself. Unless all students use the same word processing program, the easiest workaround for this option is to have every student save their documents as Rich Text Format (.rtf). Rich Text Format can be selected from the "Save As" command. While it is possible for every student in a group to have access to all the groups' letters (not to respond to but to read), the number of files that would need to be exchanged can make this quite difficult in practice.

Email

If all students have access to email, it can be a useful method of letter exchange. However, if a student does not have a private, personal email account, there is always the possibility that one or more letters might be deleted by another user of the account (this is, of course, also possible with personally owned email accounts). Exchanging letters via email can also offers you the opportunity to discuss levels of formality with email. Just because email is often considered an informal means of communication, this does not mean that all emails should be informal or forego the conventions of standard usage.

If your students exchange letters via email, encourage them to save copies of letters the send and receive. It is a good idea to save sent messages electronically incase they get lost or deleted. If you are evaluating letters on completion or content, you may want students to either Cc you the

email or print out a copy and give it to you. Email makes it quite easy for every member of a group to see and read each other's letters.

Online Discussion Forum

Online discussion forums, sometimes known as threaded forums or bulletin boards, have the advantage of holding all the letters of an exchange in one place and making them available to everyone in a group or class. Forums are organized hierarchically, much like a formal outline, with the original post (level 1) at the top and all responses to it placed underneath. A response to an original post is a level 2 post, and a response to a level 2 post is a level 3 post. If you think of the posts in a discussion forum organized like a formal outline, a level 1 post would be a capital Roman numeral (i.e. I, II, III, etc.), a level 2 post would be an Arabic numeral under the capital Roman numeral to which it responds (i.e. 1, 2, 3, etc.), a level 3 post would a lower case Roman numeral under the Arabic numeral to which it responds (i.e. i, ii, iii, etc.), and so on. As all letters are posted to the group or class forum, it is quite easy for all group members to read all letters in their group. Many courseware products, such as WebCT and Blackboard have built in discussion forums, and free online discussion forums are available from the Inquiry Page iLabs, ProBoards.com, Tapped In, and Free-Conversant (see Web Resources). Most online discussion forums allow users to control who can make and read posts, thereby providing privacy for the group.

Weblog

A Weblog is an online journal, which can be owned by an individual or by a group. Depending upon the settings, people can respond to particular entries in a Weblog and they can even respond to responses. Unlike most online discussion forums, Weblogs often organize their entries by date, with the most recent entry coming first; however, responses to an entry are placed underneath that particular entry as with online discussion forums. Many Weblog servers allow posts to be made private. Free Weblog providers include Blogger.com, Free-Conversant, and LiveJournal (see Web Resources). LiveJournal, in addition to allow group Weblogs (known as communities), allows users to designate each other as "friends," which allows one to see all posts made by their friends from one page.

Remember, each of these options has its own particular advantages and disadvantages and no one medium is better than any other. Pick the one that will best meet your needs and the needs of your students.