

Dismantling Bullying with a Class Magazine: Creating Connections and Community

All students gain status with their peers by writing articles about their unique cultural interests for a Classroom Geographic magazine.

Charlie was a target for bullying in the high school where I taught. At 15, kids had not grown out of the need to pick on Charlie for his high-pitched voice, his overweight stature, and his uncontrollable and exuberant laugh. What really targeted Charlie for the bullying, however, was his seemingly childlike fascination with drawing comic book heroes. Charlie could spend entire class periods sketching Wolverine, Superman, and Captain America. He carried his notebooks with him everywhere, but his “heroes” stood by mutely as kids would taunt and tease Charlie. As a teacher, I could control the behavior from the front of the room and outside my door, but I knew it didn’t stop there. I knew Charlie had long walks home and seemingly interminable lunch periods to survive.

What I discovered during my year teaching Charlie was that by using a class magazine to which we all contributed, I could take kids’ interests and talents—and in Charlie’s case, his fascination with comics—and allow student writers to speak as experts about their subjects. When our *Springfield Geographic* went to print, as a class we learned about the multifaceted and rich history behind comics: Superman, the first comic book hero, is recognized worldwide. The largest collection of comic books is not in Uncle Murry’s basement but actually resides in the Library of Congress with more than 100,000 issues. And when Marvel and DC finally had a throw-down, sparks flew. Through the process of discovering Charlie’s fascination with a really interesting topic (and one, quite frankly, that might make Charlie some major money one day),

one vulnerable kid began to see himself as an important member of our classroom and our school, and his peers responded with new insight: Charlie was not just a kid drawing cartoon characters, he was an expert in his field and a student deserving some respect.

Taking Control in the Classroom

Bullying and the behaviors associated with it have become hot-button topics for all educators and parents. While teachers themselves grew up with schoolyard bullies, these 21st-century intimidators appear different. They seem equipped with enough negative energy to persist in their bullying far beyond what was typical years ago on the playground, and they have increased access to their victims through the Internet and cell phones as well as the means to expand their audience by the same means. Despite national attention, misunderstandings still surround bullying. Bullying is not the same thing as conflict. While conflict involves antagonism among two or more people, “bullying only occurs where there is a power imbalance where one child has a hard time defending him or herself,” and because of this, “conflict resolution or mediation strategies are sometimes misused” to solve bullying problems (Stop Bullying Now!). Still, teachers and staff tend to deemphasize the need for conflict resolution or anti-bullying programs. They are expensive and time-consuming, and in the highly charged school climate currently emphasizing test-preparation and meeting state and national standards, any kind of comprehensive approach to the

social problems of students may be pushed aside. This is when it becomes crucial that teachers look for ways to reduce the negative consequences of bullying behavior as well as increase the opportunities to celebrate individual accomplishments for all students in the effort to thwart this imbalance of

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social power. Lindsey OBrennan and Catherine Bradshaw note, “of particular concern is that among middle and high school students, the majority of bullies tend to be perceived as popular,” and that “it is likely that the bullies’ power and dominance over their peers increases their social status within a peer group.” Because teens in particular perceive social status as extremely important, they conclude that “it is important for

teachers to be aware of the varying social standings of bullies when intervening” (2). Clearly, the way teachers handle volatile bullying situations is crucial to the well-being of individual students and the climate of their classrooms.

As an instructor to high school and community college students, and as a teacher educator, I have found that the greatest means to improving relationships among highly emotional teens and young adults, many of whom are struggling to bring balance to their tumultuous lives, is to empower them to find things they can be successful doing. Since I immerse them in reading and writing, my assignments gravitate toward reading about individuals who succeed in difficult situations and writing about personal experiences in which students can point to tough choices and winning ways of being. Instead of alienating others by retaliating against bullies, my goal is to find opportunities in the classroom to celebrate individual accomplishments and unique attributes in each of my students, thus encouraging classmates to see each other as credible compatriots instead of competitors, or worse than that, lower rungs to be stepped on while climbing the social ladder. Some students tend to garner the most attention, specifically, highly visible athletes, scholars, musicians, theater buffs, etc. But what of the students who partici-

pate and enjoy clubs and environments outside the sphere of the school? How do we make those connections visible enough to celebrate them?

Using Research to Build Bridges

Collaborative research projects offer a window into our lives as human beings in relationships with one another. Sarah Robbins and the Georgia Teachers Affiliated with the Keeping and Creating American Communities (KCAC) Project suggest, “Writing and reading . . . can forge shared understanding . . . [and] students discover the power that collaborative records of lived experience acquire in writing based on authentic research” (1). An assignment I have used for this purpose I call Classroom Geographic. The assignment can be geared toward any age group, and I have found success with it on every level. It is modeled after *National Geographic* magazine, which for decades has opened Americans’ eyes to the cultures of others around the world. I use it in some of the same ways; I describe the mission of the assignment as “exploring students’ micro-cultures through writing in the genre of magazine articles,” and we begin this seven-class series by exploring the concepts of “belonging.” In their daily writing journals, I ask students to first listen to my instructions and then respond. “When I say the phrase, ‘This is where I belong,’ draw a picture of what comes to mind.” In response, some students scratch out pictures of hockey rinks, beaches, and family dinner tables; others illustrate computer desks, fast-food restaurants, or neighborhood basketball courts. Next, I ask students to add text to their pictures—words or phrases that help clarify where they are and what they are doing. Are they members of this team, employees in this restaurant, “friends” to their Facebook contacts? We then pair-share our pictures with another member of the class, thus carefully opening the window to our worlds where we belong outside of this room.

Our next activity involves defining concepts of “macro-cultures” and “micro-cultures” and making lists of the cultures of which we’re a part. For example, I tell them, “I am a citizen of this country, a teacher, a mother in my nuclear family” as examples of macro-cultures. But as I narrow it down, I can emphasize more specifically, “I am citizen of Kalamazoo, Michigan, a teacher of developmental

English, a full-time working mother,” and these details narrow the norms of my cultures and define me more specifically within my groups. Students work on their own lists of all the groups and cultures of which they are a part, and they narrow those to their own micro-cultures to which they belong. See Figure 1 for some examples. Finally, they settle on one micro-culture they want to study and report on, in an effort to understand their status as “expert,” and teach others about their group. Some stick with the place and people they drew about in their journals; others move into uncharted territory. Their excitement follows them out the door.

The next phase of our assignment incorporates a “proposal” sheet students must fill out, which identifies their culture, explains why their culture is important to them, defines characteristics that contribute to a “stereotype” of this group, identifies what access they have to other members of this group (for interviewing and observing purposes), and establishes the purpose for their writing. To understand the purpose for the larger assignment, we peruse several copied articles taken from *National Geographic*, and first in small groups, then later as a class, we do a genre analysis, identifying each article’s purpose, audience, and conventions. Students surprise themselves by determining that these articles, which cover multiple nations and cultures, are unified in their purpose: to educate the reading audience, aka “outsiders,” about these people and their group norms, traditions, and mores. Writers emphasize details of dress, speech, descriptions of place and people, and facts about all facets of the culture and its members. Conventions for this genre include a brief (bold) introduction, interviews and observation notes, pictures, graphics (including maps), and pull-out text boxes. We identify all the features of these articles that tie them to one another, despite the varied subject matter. We begin to see how our diverse topics will bind us together as a classroom community of writers, researchers, and reporters.

Students leave the classroom this day with a unified purpose for their writing and instructions to interview members and take observation notes in their micro-culture communities. Importantly, I give them a week to take interview notes since access to their selected groups may involve lengthy response time due to a predetermined team meet-

FIGURE 1. Micro-Culture Examples

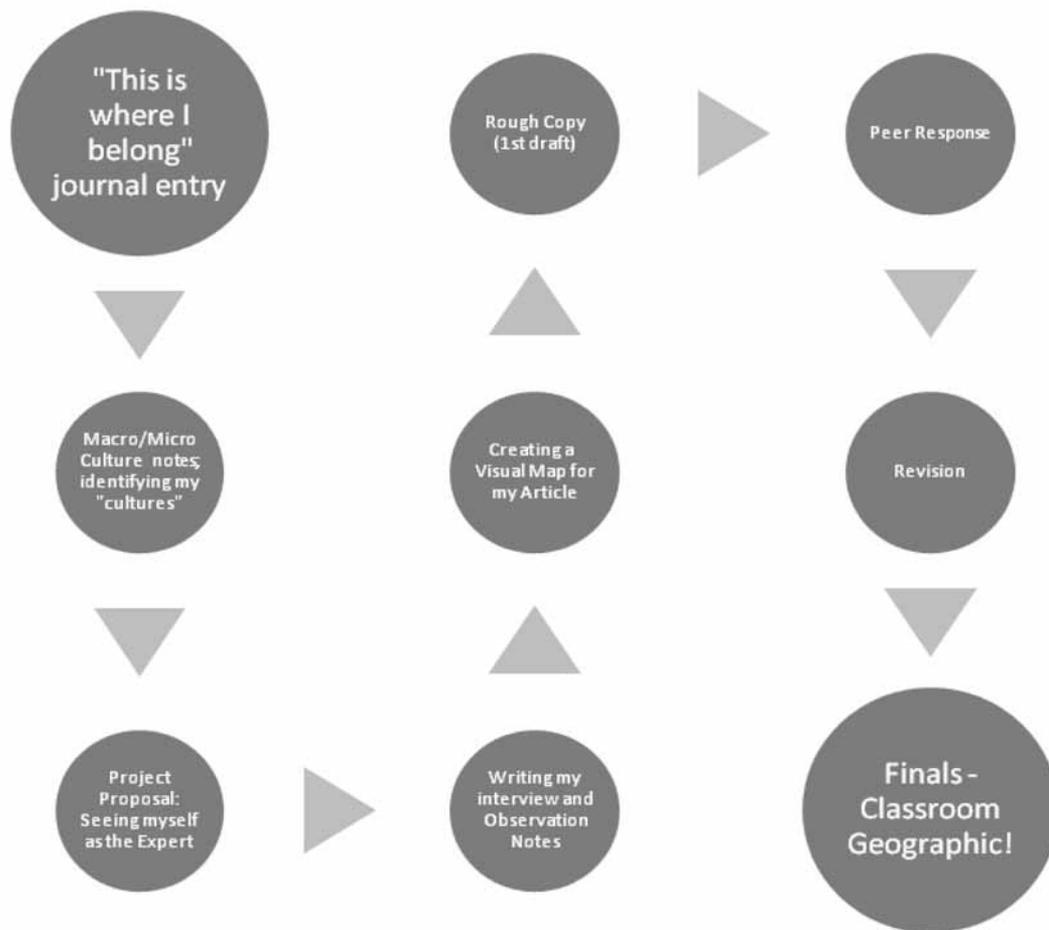
Some Student Cultures Explored:

- Hockey Team
- Celtic Dance Club
- African Culture Club
- Scouts
- Piano Students
- Gifted and Talented
- Football Team
- Flautists
- Fast-Food Employees
- Future Farmers
- Cheerleaders
- Showchoir
- Hunters
- Club Soccer
- Fantasy Football Enthusiasts
- World of Warcraft
- Harry Potter Fans
- 4H

ing, a delayed work schedule, or a call or email that is not answered or returned immediately. This is a great opportunity for students to learn how important it is for writers to do some legwork early, so that the process of prewriting, composing, revising, and polishing their work is not thwarted by someone who doesn’t return a phone call or answer an email for a couple of days. As writers, we must anticipate and respect the busy lives of others, and learn tactics (starting early, selecting more than one source, etc.) that will help us be successful. This can become another important opportunity to learn about empowering ourselves as individuals and not blaming others or allowing them to determine our success as individuals. Figure 2 illustrates the cycle of activities the students go through for the Classroom Geographic project.

Returning to the assignment a week or so later, students share ideas about what they have learned about their cultures. Some have learned about the history of their culture. Ebrima, an international student from Ghana, interviewed the current president of the African Culture Club, of which he was a part, and learned about the group’s origins and various activities members participated in throughout the last 20 years. Others

FIGURE 2. The Research Cycle



discover elements of “look and dress” and language conventions associated with their group. Tyler was surprised to learn others needed help identifying “bender,” “scrub,” and “clapper,” all terms with which he and his buddies, who live in the world of hockey, are totally familiar. He writes, “Once you have been playing this game for many years, you will develop a new style of language. . . . ‘Bender’ means you can’t skate; a ‘muffin’ happens when you shoot the puck and it wobbles through the air going really slow, making you look like a ‘tool’; ‘rattled’ is how you’ll feel after getting hit hard like, ‘that kid just got rattled.’” Perhaps my favorite is when Tyler identified the “grocery stick” on the team, which, according to this hockey expert, means “You’re the kid who separates the offense from the defense and you hardly ever play a shift.” As teacher, I could visibly identify Tyler’s shoul-

ders moving from slump to stature as he explained his micro-culture and recognized his own “expert status” as a player in this game. Other students share exciting ideas about the time and energy members of their group pour into their training; for example, one young woman involved in Celtic dance commits more than 20 hours a week to her talent! Still others share important facts about their heritage, as Maria did, when she taught us about the Mexican American foods her family uses to celebrate cultural holidays. Still others infuse humorous anecdotes to entertain their audience as did Eric, who taught us about what it means to “think outside the bun” as a Taco Bell employee. Students find their own place and voice, sharing accomplishments and identifying with others throughout the length of this assignment. These connections fly in the face of bullying behaviors that dehumanize

their victims. Students demonstrate expertise that elevates their status and encourages respect shared among members of our classroom, which is its own “micro culture.” These understandings can lead to tolerance and respect at the macro level. Students who may have appeared as loners in the classroom are now recast as full members of larger, accomplished groups.

Writing like Reporters

Finally, we’re ready to compose our articles. In the school’s computer lab, students work hard to write like reporters. After a brief introduction, writers identify their groups in third-person narrative form and explain all of the features that make their cultures unique to others. This assignment provides a great opportunity to explore creative features of word processing—students can change font and font sizes for their introductions, can pull out text boxes and frame quotes, and can infuse their articles with photographs from their own archives and/or fair-use pictures from the Web. When writers hit the “two column” buttons to move their writing into magazine formatting, the atmosphere is electric! Students are surprised that using a simple word processing program can lead to so much fun. After rough drafts and a quick print, students are ready to peer review each other’s work, providing even more insight into the lives of one another. Finally, the finished products are collected and bound together in a simple, stapled *Springfield Geographic* magazine with notes about each author at the conclusion of their articles. Students pore through their copies and celebrate the lives of their classmates. “I didn’t know you played _____!” and “I’m a _____ too!” I could fill in the blanks with multiple exclamations of respect and connectedness that have resulted from their projects over the years of teaching high school and college-age students, many of whom only weeks before thought they had little to nothing in common with their classmates.

As educators, we know that helping students increase their self-esteem and bridge positive connections provide the greatest defense against victimization in the hands of a bully. Like Sarah Robbins and the KCAC teachers discovered in their collaborative research process, “the ability to see

others’ perspectives empathetically is crucial now,” and they ask, “How can our project’s focus on writing help?” (2). Instead of pouring my time and attention into controlling the negative behavior of one perpetrator, I find this project and its activities put the control back into the hands of the students working to lift themselves up and take control of their own lives and situations. Equally important, this unit also meets my criteria for using critical class time to read and write and share our literacy with one another. Not surprisingly, many of my students find this project one of the most influential, demanding, yet fun writing projects we produce throughout the semester. Because older students have returned to tell me, I know that these class magazines are still in their archives at home, artifacts that celebrate the connectedness we enjoyed as a classroom community of readers and writers.

Why We Need to Protect Our Schools and the Lives within Them

Mike Rose, successful scholar, teacher, teacher-educator, and author of such books as *Lives on the Boundary: The Struggles and Achievements of America’s Underprepared* (Touchstone, 1999) and *Possible Lives: The Promise of Public Education in America* (Penguin, 1996), among many others, wrote an opinion piece for the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* in the fall of 2007. In it, he examines his own memories to answer the question, “Why go to school?” It’s an important question since school is where students learn their three Rs but continue to face uphill battles in social, emotional, and academic relationships with faculty and their peers. Rose writes, “We should talk more about school as a place where young people form connections beyond the family with adults who can guide and mentor them. This was hugely important for me. These relationships often develop around a shared interest, around biology or mechanics, basketball or theater, thus putting a human face on knowledge and discipline.” He continues, “School is a place where young people learn how to think with each other, how to jointly puzzle over a problem, how to make sense of discordant views, how to arrive at consensus. . . . This, finally, was what education gave me, a pathway from hazy disaffection to competence, to a dawning awareness that I could figure things out and do something

with what I learned. This was the best training I could have gotten for a vocation and citizenship.”

Online learning, independent study, education in isolation—these may all sound tempting to students and parents who are sick and tired of the bullying that happens within our schools. Yet, when Rose suggests putting “a face” on the unique knowledge, talents, identities, and cultures our students bring to class, he emphasizes the purpose behind schools: they provide the greatest opportunities for us to grow and learn as citizens. We must learn to work together with others like and unlike us, as preparation for living and contributing to American democracy. I have found that assignments such as Classroom Geographic afford occasions for students to celebrate themselves and the people and places with whom they belong; in turn, they confirm and affirm their identities and the identities of their classmates and organically move away from bullying behavior toward acceptance and affirmation of others. Assignments like this one invite students to share their passions and ideas with each other, and as Charlie reminded us so expertly in our classroom several years ago, school should be a safe

place where students pursue their academic and vocational dreams: “Dreams save us. Dreams lift us up and transform us. And on my soul, I swear . . . until my dream of a world where dignity, honor and justice becomes the reality we all share—I’ll never stop fighting”—Superman (Kelly). 

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Cheryl Almeda is an instructor of Developmental Reading and Writing at Kalamazoo Valley Community College in Kalamazoo, Michigan. She formerly taught high school in Springfield, Ohio, and after that she worked with the *English 1000: The Writing Process* Program at Western Michigan University with Jonathan Bush. In all three academic settings she’s been able to adapt and use the Classroom Geographic assignment to meet the needs of her classroom communities. Contact her at calmeda@kvcc.edu.

READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

“Building Vietnam War Scavenger Hunts through Web-Based Inquiry” brings multiple perspectives into the classroom during or after the reading of any book, fiction or nonfiction, about Vietnam. Working in small groups, students adopt the perspective of members of a group involved in the war (e.g., soldier, nurse, doctor, photojournalist, TV reporter) and conduct Internet research to explore how that particular group was affected by the war. After completing their research, students compose a related scavenger hunt and share it with their peers, and they reflect on how their research relates to the book they have read. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/building-vietnam-savenger-hunts-821.html>