

OUTSTANDING TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT

**FINAL REPORT ON THE OTLA PHASE 6 (ENGLISH) PROJECT –
LETTER EXCHANGE SCHEME**

New City College

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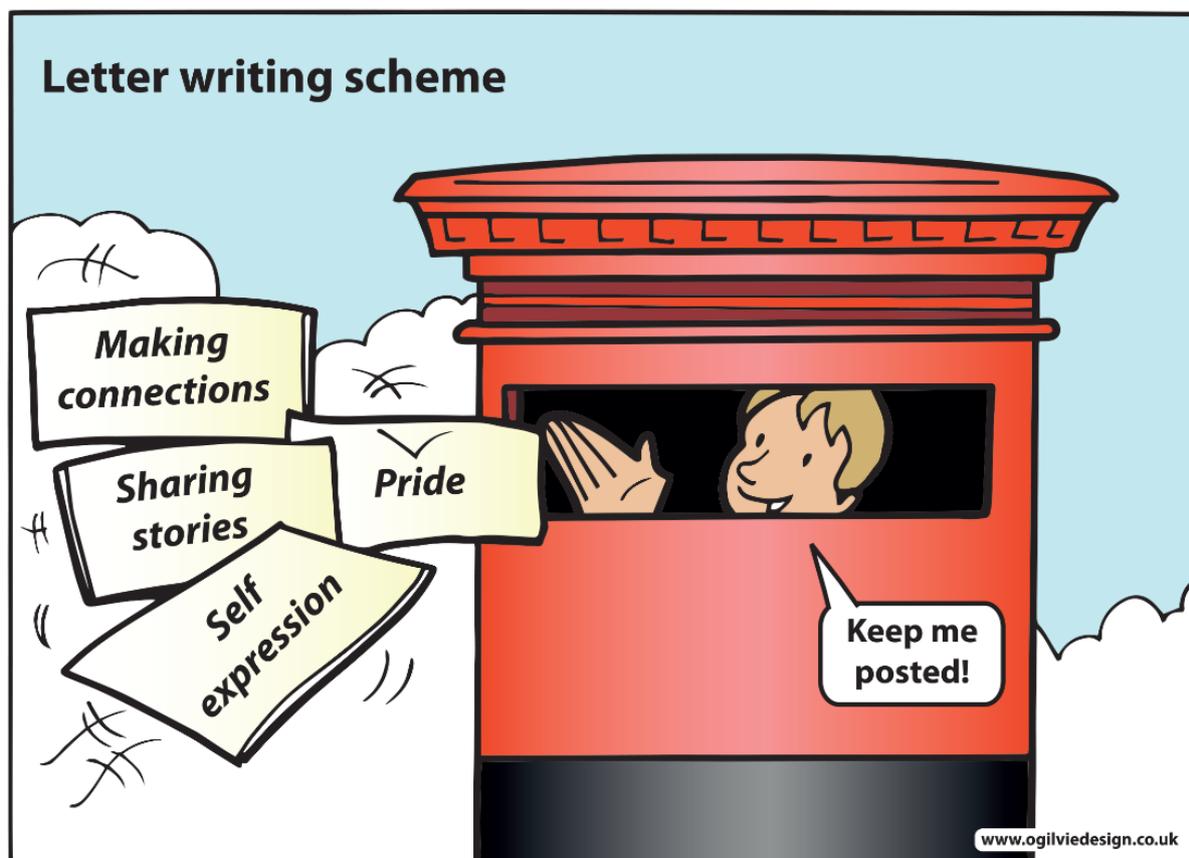


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Final Report - Letter Exchange Scheme

New City College



At the beginning of the academic year over fifty 16-19 year old Functional Skills English Level 1 students took part in a letter exchange scheme at four different New City College Campuses. They each wrote and exchanged three letters about themselves, their interests and goals in 2020.

Development was clearly evident in both the engagement of the task and motivation of the students as they carefully crafted letters. They were also very proud of collaborating with other students and being part of an action research project at New City College.

Many of these students asked if they could continue with the Letter Exchange Scheme as part of the project and groups of students from GCSE English and some adult students also asked if they could join the scheme.

Rationale

Today's relationships are often built around what is immediately convenient, and building good relationships was only one argument in favour of taking the time to write letters by hand. The New City College Letter Exchange Scheme was developed to engage and motivate learners to find their own voice and become more confident, proficient writers who enjoy the craft of writing.

A currently common response from 16 year old students, when asked to write a letter, was one of resistance to the task. This was followed sharply with the justification that no one writes letters any more, and that indeed today an email or text would be more appropriate. The task of letter writing was therefore often undertaken with little engagement or motivation for writing. This often resulted in an unsatisfactory product and poor learning experience. However, by presenting the opportunity to students to participate in authentic and extended writing practice as part of the Letter Exchange Scheme, it was hoped that their motivation and enthusiasm might quickly rise.

When this project was first initiated it was thought that the act of writing and receiving a letter might be novel for many people and also that students might find positive and confident social interaction outside their immediate peer group challenging. However, it was felt that establishing these kinds of connections was vital to a sense of belonging and engagement in learning. For some people writing to a stranger could have been the first steps to this. It was also thought that sharing stories and experiences could improve self-esteem and self-confidence.

Approach

Students were allocated a partner at another campus by teachers. The letters took the form of an introductory and a reply letter. The word count of the letters was relative to the level at which the student was working and was proofread carefully before the letter was sent to their partner student. Letters were sent in a batch by each college by an agreed date within each phase.

Four Lecturers from New City College were involved in the project, along with curriculum leaders and the Head of English at New City College. All the learners were from Functional Skills Level 1 English courses and the project involved approximately 50 students across four sites.

Teachers needed a commitment by the students that they would engage in the project and agree to some simple basic rules aimed to protect all participants' privacy. This was important especially at Level 1, where there is traditionally resistance to writing. Selecting the more motivated students to take part in the project gave the teachers a chance to see the extent to which the initiative was effective, and what modifications might contribute to its success in the future. This approach follows Zydney's (2012) social constructivist theory of learning.

The Scheme of Work (Appendix 3) outlined below was followed by all four teams over a period of time:

- Suitable Functional Skills Level 1 groups were selected.
- The letter exchange concept was introduced to the students.
- Profiles were carefully created by each student which helped them present themselves fully in the first letter.
- Letter 1 was planned and drafted (Appendix 1).
- Letter 1 proof read and posted.
- Letter 1 was received and distributed to students.
- Letter 2 (reply to letter 1) was planned and drafted.

- Letter 2 reviewed by peers; strengths, weaknesses and opportunities were discussed.
- Final changes and proof reading were made to letter 2.
- Letter 2 posted
- Letter 2 received by partner colleges.
- Peer discussion of Letter 2 strengths, weaknesses, opportunities. Suggestions for responses and a social event was proposed, giving the students participating in the letter exchange scheme the opportunity to meet one another.
- Letter 3 drafted by students and responses peer assessed by students in group. Improvements made.
- Letter 3 completed and proofread by students and posted.
- Letter 3 received and class discussion about the letters received and plan for future communication.
- Plenary.

The Team leaders worked collaboratively to:

- Identify and share good practice and ways of working across teams.
- Develop a Padlet Dashboard.
- Provide across-team support and sharing of best practice.
- Present the letter writing scheme to other colleagues at CPD sessions.

Professional learning: Evidence of changes in teaching, learning and assessment practices

During the project many students started to attend classes on a more regular basis as students were enjoying their lessons more and curious to get to know a pen pal. They were particularly excited after exchanging the first letter.

Interactions between students were positive as they engaged in the scheme and developed deeper connections with their peers. Equally, the connections among their teachers grew and they had a deeper sense of belonging and engagement with learning. Writing to a stranger required sharing stories and experiences, which also contributed to improving self-esteem and self-confidence. Over time some deep seated negative personal narratives began to become more positive, and confidence improved. The act of receiving a letter was more personal than the barrage of spam and what was often perceived as the inauthenticity of social media posts. Letter writing came to symbolise an investment of time, care and effort. There was also an enhanced sensory experience involved in holding and reading a personal handwritten letter.

It was thought that students might enjoy their lessons more, particularly after the receipt of the first letter. Attendance improved as lessons built on the project themes and ideas.

At the start of the course, students suggested that writing was something they had not thought they enjoyed. However, the teachers found that once students engaged in self-expression, they made deeper connections with their new peers. They said

they found it difficult and did not think they were successful at it; nor could they identify clearly with the difficulties they experienced in their writing skills.

A piece of free writing revealed that the majority did not produce pieces of writing beyond 100 words and the writing itself had a high proportion of spelling, punctuation and grammar errors. The sentences in the writing were mainly short or very extended and the ideas communicated were simple and not always coherent. In their everyday lives, most students said they did not engage in writing beyond messaging or on social media. Very few students had ever received a personal, handwritten letter or postcard.

From a wider perspective, behaviour in the classroom was often characterised by low level disruptive behaviour and disengagement and few students were genuinely motivated to improve their skills.

Some students also asked questions that provoked discussion and debate. Students actively planned and reviewed their written work. This led to the development of skills such as peer marking. Some students chose to read their letters out loud in class and confidence grew with this. They were more able to articulate where they needed to improve, and some students chose to develop their skills outside of class time. The letters they sent became livelier and more interesting, as now they were being written for an intended audience and were therefore more carefully compiled. There was also a greater awareness of the value of quality handwriting and the craft skills involved.

For many students at the end of the scheme, letter writing started to symbolise an investment of time, care and effort. There was also an enhanced pleasure in holding and reading a personal, handwritten letter.

The new Functional Skills Level 1 English Guidelines were used in assessment, with a focus on spelling, punctuation, grammar and writing composition. Work was assessed by teachers at each stage of the project.

As the project progressed teachers exchanged observations about learners' developing skills, confidence and enjoyment of the project as the letters were exchanged.

Evidence of improved collaboration and changes in organisational practices

Although we have not created a new safeguarding process in the organisation in relation to the declarations by the students, the existing process continues to be followed. During the project, the college acknowledged the importance of safeguarding students and their sense of safety in potentially threatening situations, including matters of welfare and mental health wellbeing.

Evidence of improvement in learners' achievements, retention and progression

Developing personal profiles was a rich part of the scheme, as students had not previously represented themselves in this more considered way to a peer they had

not already met. It was evident that letter writing and the exchange of letters was a confidence building process that benefitted the students.

Some of the discussions that took place at this point generated a good deal of meaningful practice. Students actively took pride in planning and reviewing their written work. Peer marking was developed as well as critical analytical skills.

Some students chose to read their letters out aloud to others and could often articulate how both their own and others' work could be improved. The letters sent became livelier and more interesting, and handwriting, grammar and vocabulary improved.

Attendance rates improved as there was clear enthusiasm and engagement in this project. The strategy of focusing on areas of spelling, punctuation and grammar to ensure that the meaning was clear for the reader has had a positive impact on student assessment outcomes.

The most important evidence for this were the learners' letters and teachers' accounts of what they planned and how learners responded to the task (and to the letters from peers). These outputs have great credibility and show the possibilities for changing the thinking and their attitudes towards peers.

Learning from this project

Students turned out to be much more receptive to the letter writing scheme than first anticipated. This appeared to derive both from the pleasure of developing craft skills of handwriting, using a quality pen on quality paper, and being able to express themselves informally and in a purposeful and structured way. Additionally, the letter exchange scheme offered the opportunity for students to experience a platform different from social media through which to get to know new peer groups. Many of the students involved are keen to develop the letter exchange scheme with other groups of students in other parts of the UK. Contact has already been established with the following colleges: Mid-Kent College, East Riding College, Derby College, Manchester College.

Other 16-19 year old and Adult GCSE students have expressed a keen interest in being involved in this project next year and in particular in communicating with others elsewhere in the UK. This is a unique opportunity for young people and adults from Inner City London, some of whom may also have newly arrived in the UK, to get to know others already established in the UK.

In future, it would benefit learning if closer assessment of the students' progress were shared beforehand and more formal peer assessment were to take place. Workshops could be held to develop the craft of handwriting, which might prove to be beneficial to many students.

The positive impact that this project has had on the teachers and students involved is evident both in terms of raising awareness of the benefits of positive communication between peers and the pride with which many students want to

present themselves, their skills and their talents to another peer. This is learning which has quality and much value both academically and personally.

As we move forward, it is hoped that working collaboratively will create new, stronger working relationships between each of the campuses and lead to the sharing of ideas across the whole group.

Appendix 1 – Student Letters

Introductory Letters

Example 1

11th October 2019

New City College
The English Department
Tower Hamlets Campus
Poplar
E14 0AF

Dear New City College student

I see myself as a diamond. I have many faces and personalities. I love money however I also love my family! In particular I look up to my eldest brother. I would say he is my role model because he makes a lot of money doing a job that he loves. That is what I want to be like, when I am older... you could also say that my brother is one of my many faces.

My hobbies are horse riding. I have been horse riding since I was seven, which has ~~almost~~ almost been ten years now. Recently I have been lucky enough to own my own horse! Six months ago, I got really badly injured by my horse Bruon. He kicked me on my leg and I ended up having a bruise on my leg, which took about four months to heal. My biggest achievement was jumping Bruon, my eighteen hand Shire cross. Bruon comes from the mountains ⁱⁿ Scotland.

Response Letters

Example 1

Dear Diamond,

My name is Bill Gates, ~~I~~ While reading your letter I have found that we have a lot in common, I also love money and my family, ~~I~~ I also listch to ~~to~~ the artists you listch and I love animals.

I am a very rich man, I take private jets just to go to ~~Shan~~ Harrods. I am a millionair but I still go to my local chicken shop daily. I own six houses and each of them are in different ~~over~~ countries. I just drove down Downing street and flexed on all the politicians. At the moment im ~~in my car~~ on the M25 in my Tesla model x writing this letter. What car do you drive?
Why is it important to drive?

Example 2

Dear Bill Gates

Thank you for your letter. It was nice to hear from you. It is great to hear that you love animals too! The kangaroos and wallabies ^{are} dying even though they are in nature reserve. Hopefully it will all stop before too many more of these animals die. It is all because of the human race, that this is happening because of global warming and these animals can do nothing about it. I guess because you have all this money you can go to Australia and help them put out the fires and give money to the Australian fire fighters, so that they can keep trying to put out the fires and save the animals.

Appendix 2 – Student Planning

Personal Profile for alias 'Bill Gates'

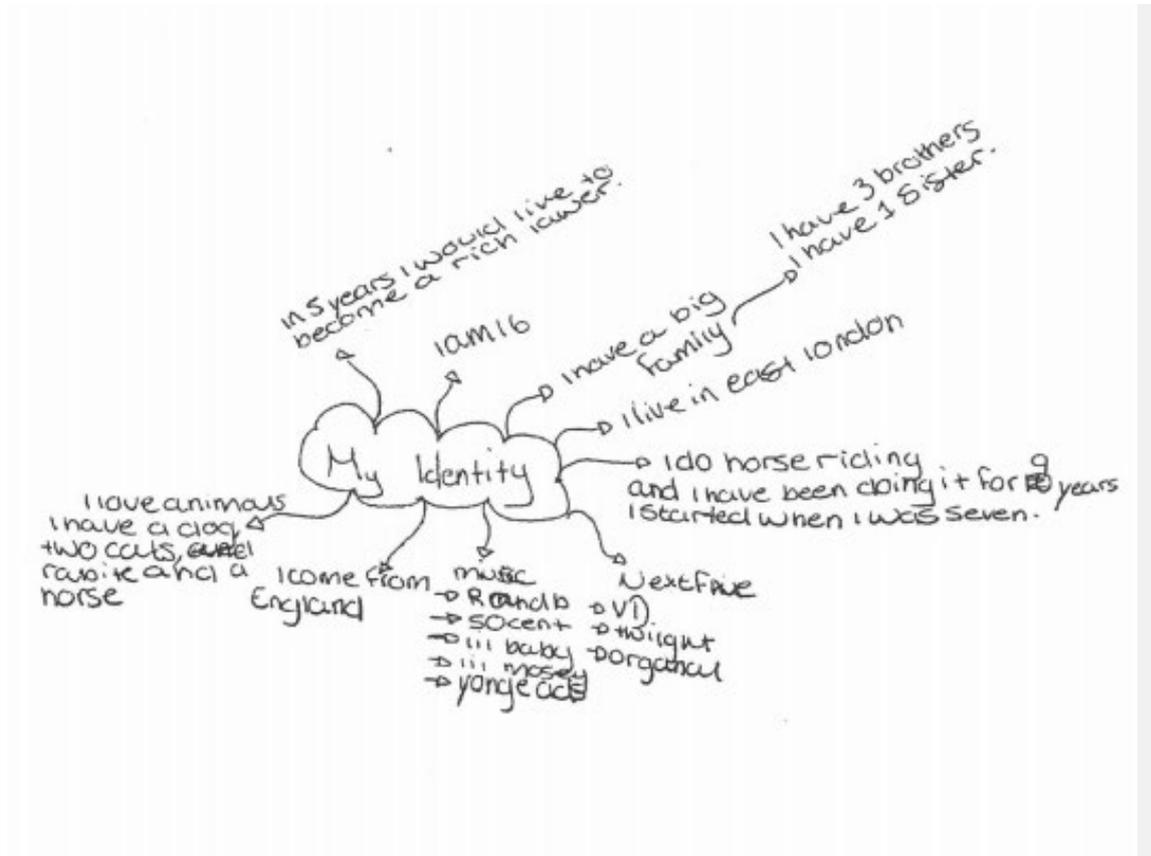
Task: Create a character for a film, video game, book, play. Make a few notes under each heading.

- Physical appearance (body)
Skinny, old
- Physical appearance (clothing and adornment)
formal clothing
Suits
- Social categories (age, gender, occupation, ethnicity and so on)
Male, 63 years old
- Aspirations
~~get~~ get rich, help people
- Three things liked about self (by the character)
richest man in the world, helps people.



Mind Mapping

'A Diamond' Planning 1



'A Diamond' Planning version 2

Introduction

- > role models - brother
- > because he has money.

1 pg

horse riding

- jumping my horse
- getting injured 6 months ago
and carried on riding.
- dog Jace
- cat little one
big boy
- rabbit - kisses.

Pg 2

Family

3 brothers

1 sister

4 bed room house.

I am the middle child
at home.

Appendix 3 - Letter Exchange Research Project Timelines

| Letter Exchange Research Project – Timelines | |
|--|---|
| 23 rd Sept | Select FS Level 1 Group |
| 30 th Sept | Lesson 1 Introduce letter exchange concept to students, work on student profiles (1hrs 30mins) |
| 7 th Oct | Lesson 2 Student profile to be completed and letter 1 planned and drafted by students |
| 14 th Oct | Lesson 3 Letter 1 completed and posted |
| 21st Oct | Half Term |
| 28 th Oct | Lesson 4 Letter 1 received by partner college and displayed on wall for students to select pen pal |
| 4 th Nov | Lesson 5 Letter 2 (reply to letter 1) planned and drafted |
| 11 th Nov | Lesson 6 Letter 2 completed by students |
| 18 th Nov | Lesson 7 Letter 2 reviewed by peers who feedback |
| 25 th Nov | Lesson 8 Final changes to letter 2 and proofreading |
| 2 nd Dec | Lesson 9 Letter 2 posted |
| 9 th Dec | Lesson 10 Letter 2 received by partner colleges |

| | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| 16 th Dec | Lesson 11 Letter drafted by students |
| 23rd Dec | Christmas holidays |
| 30th Dec | Christmas holidays |
| 6 th Jan | Lesson 12 Letter 3 completed by students |
| 13 th Jan | Lesson 13 Letter 3 posted |
| 20 th Jan | Lesson 14 Letter 3 received by all students |
| 27 th Jan | Lesson 15 Class discussion |
| 3 rd Feb | Lesson 16 Plenary |

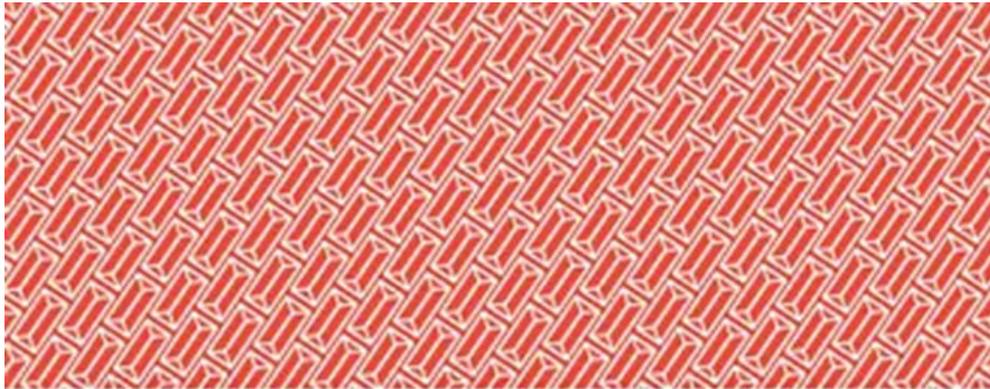
Appendix 4 – Learning Resources

Launch materials – imagery

Welcome to the exciting letter exchange scheme at New City College!



Stimulus 'More Letters of Note'



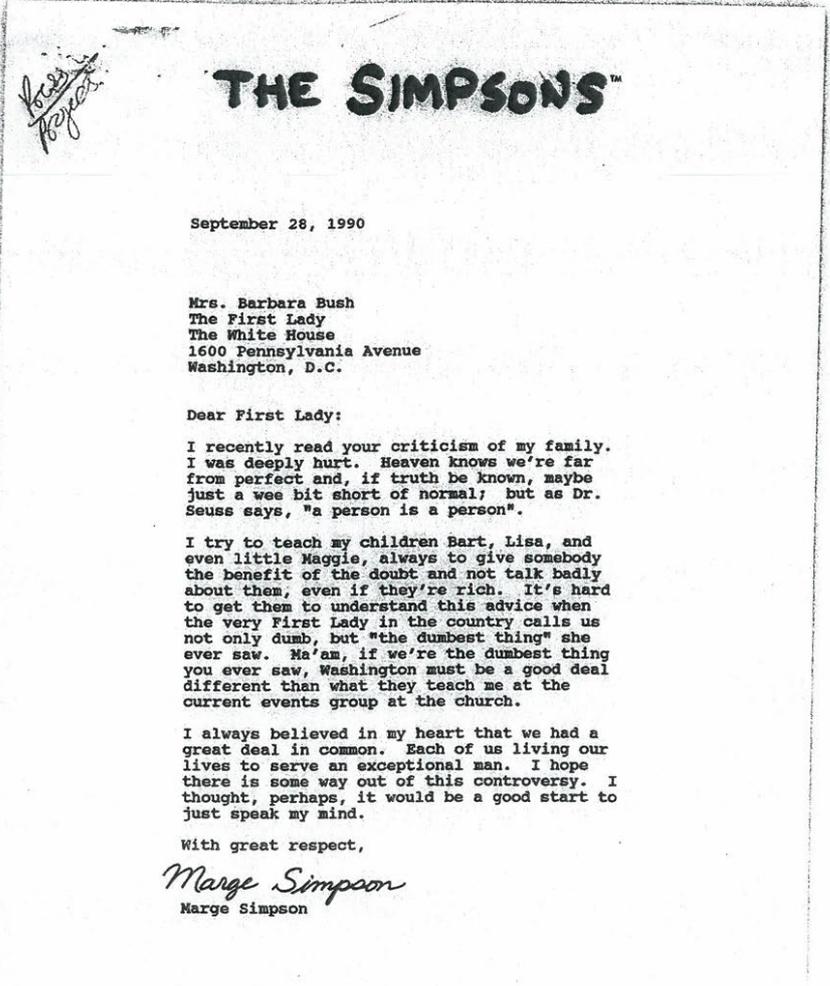
COMPILED BY SHAUN USHER

MORE LETTERS OF NOTE

CORRESPONDENCE DESERVING OF
A WIDER AUDIENCE

THE FOLLOW-UP TO THE PHENOMENAL
INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER





WITH GREAT RESPECT, MARGE SIMPSON

MARGE SIMPSON to BARBARA BUSH
September 28th, 1990

First Lady Barbara Bush received a letter from the unlikelyst of sources in 1990, as a result of an article in *People* magazine in which she

described *The Simpsons* as being "the dumbest thing [she] had ever seen". She couldn't have imagined that such a quote would elicit a response from the cartoon family itself, but it did, in the form of a reply from Marge Simpson that soon arrived at the White House. An apologetic letter from Barbara Bush followed.

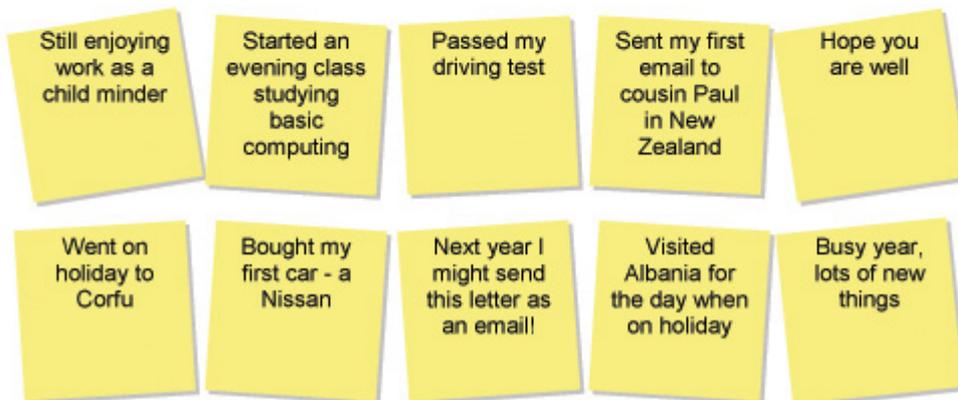
Tensions between the two families resurfaced two years later, when Barbara's husband, then-

US President George H. W. Bush, promised: "We're going to keep trying to strengthen the American family. To make them more like the Waltons and less like the Simpsons." The next episode of *The Simpsons* featured an amended opening sequence in which, after watching Bush's speech on television, Bart responded: "Hey, we're just like the Waltons. We're praying for an end to the Depression too."

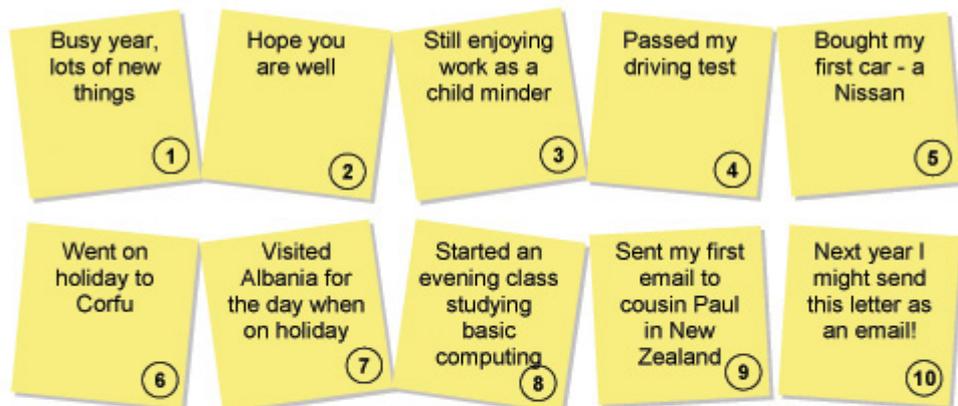
Using sticky notes to plan a letter

Jot down your ideas on sticky notes before writing a letter if you have lots of things to say. You can then move them around into the order you want.

At the end of December, Kylie wrote a letter to all her friends and family about what she'd been doing over the past year. **First she put all the different points she wanted to cover in the letter on to sticky notes:**



Then she arranged them into the order she wanted for her letter:



Try using sticky notes to plan your own informal letter to friends or relatives. Or you can use sticky notes when writing a formal letter to make sure that you've thought about all the important information you need to include in your letter.

Student Profile

'A Diamond'

A description of the learner:

This is a L1 English functional skills learner. She also studies Level 2 Health and Social Care and in the future hopes to get a job as a Probation Officer. English is her first and only language. The student loves to talk to people and is very sociable.

Initial attempt at writing their personal profiles

This learner took a while to put her profile together as she carefully considered how she wanted to present herself. The name A. Diamond she felt was both a reflection of her love of money but also the fact that she is a kind and caring person.

Learner comments 30/1/22020:

Comments by the learner as they evaluated their letter writing experience:

What do you think about writing since being part of this project?

'In particular I enjoyed the exchange of ideas about lifestyle and future goals.'

I asked her why she chose to write to Bill Gates?

'Bill Gates was interesting to write to, because he has a lot of money!'

Would you take part in a writing project like this again?

'Yes, I would like to write to a pen pal who lives outside London next time.'

Observations of the learners' progress through the exchange scheme

This learner was close to achieving a pass mark in her mock recently. I believe the letter writing project has helped her come more confident with her ability to communicate her ideas effectively to the reader. It is also clear in the development of her work that her ability to follow the conventions of structuring letters has grown.

She has been assessed with a low-level learning difficulty and needs to pay careful attention to ensure her spelling is correct. Whilst on the exchange scheme she has learned to draft and proofread work in lessons and now must continue to do this in her forthcoming exams. Proofreading all written work has been made one of her targets.

References

Zydney, J.M., McDonald, J., Dichter, A. and McDonald, E. (2012) *Going Online with Protocols: New Tools for Teaching and Learning*. New York and London: Teachers College Press.