



POETRY PEN PALS BUILD CONNECTION

BY ANNE BENNETT

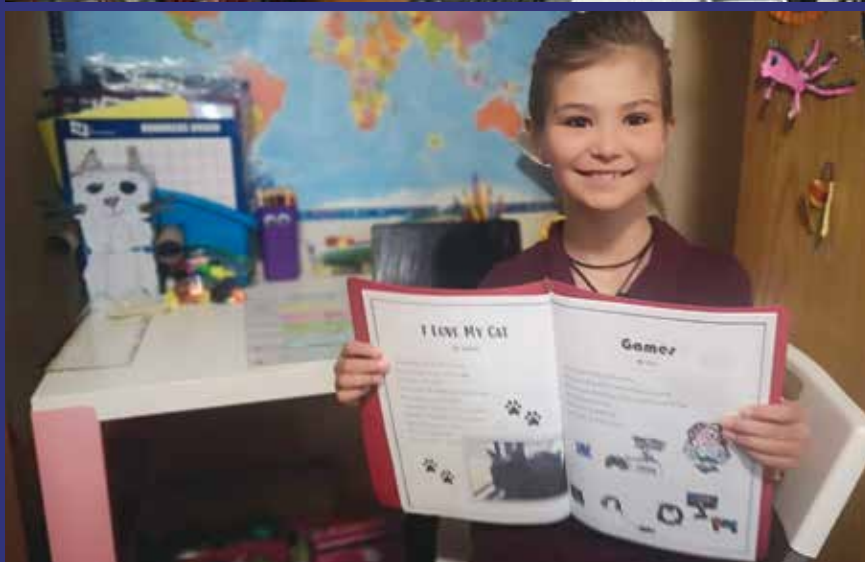
You might expect first-year teacher Scott Templeton to feel like he'd been hit by a freight train – repeatedly – this past year. Having graduated in 2020 from the University of Winnipeg's Faculty of Education, his learned experience of the classroom bore little resemblance to his lived experience of this school year.

Based at Winnipeg's Westwood Collegiate, Templeton teaches medically-advised remote learners in grade two in the mornings, and grade nine English and social studies students in the afternoon. There was no particular reason for the two cohorts to mingle, but quite by chance, the engaging and energetic Templeton found a way to build community in a most creative way: through poetry.

"As I was introducing myself at the start of the year, I noticed that many of my grade nine students were interested in what my grade two students were learning. I could almost see the eight-year-old come out in them as I explained the stories we were reading in grade two. All of this interest sparked the idea of pen pals."

The grade two students had just completed a book of poems, and were eager to share their published work. So Templeton decided to share the book with his older students on Microsoft Teams. Within two days he received roughly 30 letters from the grade nines to the grade twos.

"I spent nearly two weeks going through all the letters," he laughed. "From that moment, a constant flow of writing back and forth was started. In January, when high schools went remote for two weeks, I organized a small meet and greet. I invited



all the grade twos to join one of my English classes and the students were able to meet one another virtually. They all had questions prepared and got to put faces to the many letters they had all written.”

The students’ enthusiasm amazed Templeton.

“When we started the meeting, the first thing that anyone heard was one of my grade two students shout, ‘Look at all the people!’ It seemed to break the ice right away and put a smile on everyone’s faces.”

The warmth of connection and positive reinforcement has paid tremendous dividends for all involved, the teacher says. For both cohorts, the simple act of relating to each other provided a much-needed emotional boost during an uncertain, isolating time.

“I had high school students reflecting on their childhoods and realizing how big of an impact they made on this small group of students,” said Templeton. “From the grade two perspective, many of them were super happy to see some new faces and felt proud of the work that the older students had praised. With each of my classes facing new challenges this school year, they could relate nicely to one another, despite the vast age difference.”

“Well after our meet and greet and into second semester, I still had students asking about the grade twos. I even have students that still ask to see the new poetry books! It has definitely been a bright spot for all students involved.”

- Scott Templeton, first-year teacher

One grade nine student told Templeton that she noticed the way the younger students’ faces lit up instantly on the screen, and how she couldn’t help but smile.

“It was really special,” he said. “She reflected on the moment by realizing the common struggles all students face in the pandemic.”

Templeton was pleased and even a bit surprised by the ways in which his students engaged with the process, and

how it stuck with them.

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So, does this first-year teacher feel like he’s been hit by a freight train – repeatedly – this past year?

Absolutely not.

“I feel I’ve grown tremendously,” he said, emphatically. “As a new teacher with lots of energy and determination to make a positive impact, I’m proud of my year. I regularly reflect on how many positive things I’ve accomplished in my first year of teaching. That is my fuel for finding my next challenge as an educator.”

Turns out Templeton’s cohort of kids taught the teacher a lesson, too.

“Initially, I worried that no meaningful connection could happen between two groups of students with so many differences, but I was wrong. This experience taught me that all students have similarities, and building community is a vital part of learning. Regardless of where my teaching career takes me, I will never doubt the importance of creating community.”

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