

SCOTT CHRISTIAN. *Exchanging Lives: Middle school writers online*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English (1997). 147 pp. \$15.75 (NCTE members \$11.75). ISBN 0-8141-1643-4.

The focus of Christian's book is the Anne Frank Conference which grew out of the innovative work of the Rural Teachers Network of the Bread Loaf School of English (BLRTN) based in Middlebury, Vermont. BLRTN facilitated online conversations through a telecommunications network with teachers who, in turn, linked their students into the network.

Essentially, Christian's book describes the first three years of the Anne Frank Conference and how the process transformed views on teaching literature and writing. During this period, over 800 middle school students were involved in online discussions of the classic, *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* and its connections to their own lives.

Christian felt he had always been consistent in creating a positive environment for his students to write. He goes on to state, however,

Teaching writing, at its most basic, is like agriculture: we can do our very best to prepare the field, to plant the seed, to nurture the plants, but there is much that is out of our control. However, we can learn from each crop how best to seek the highest yield, and online literary exchanges are a fertile field for nurturing strong young writers. (p.3)

Thus began the online literary exchange with teachers and students – a journey via the network that took his young writers to geographically diverse classroom settings across America from Alaska, New Mexico, Mississippi, and Vermont.

When Christian describes a conversation between two students – one in Mississippi and the other in Alaska, he comments, “In a sense, they are seated around a literary dinner table, three thousand miles in diameter, speaking, joking, face-to-face” (p.74). An excellent picture.

Christian provides the reader with guidelines on how to follow the process – a process free of educational jargon, but not without its risks when seeking to collaborate with others. As Christian opines, “Aside from the professional issues of experience, commitment, and so on, I think the best test for selecting teachers with whom to collaborate is a simple question. Ask yourself if this person is someone whose company you'd enjoy over dinner or at a movie, or while riding across the state to a conference; if you can answer 'yes' without reservation, chances are it will be a good collaboration” (p.38). Well expressed!

A fascinating aspect of this book is the extent to which a telecommunications network formed a “life link” with both teachers and stu-

dents as learners – from different teaching experiences, schools, and communities – in a non-threatening, life-like, compassionate, yet honest environment.

Some of the observations Christian makes about the students' writing are brilliant, such as students who revealed how their opportunity to talk about their community and neighbourhood to people from another background widened their own view of themselves and others. A peripheral bonus! What emerged in the samples of student writing was a "blossoming" of understanding oneself and the surrounding world – that "self-consciousness" that Anne Frank talked about.

Christian's effort and undertaking are great; however, if I have one criticism, it is that there is not concrete evidence about teaching students to correctly cite the work of others. One would hardly expect eighth grade students to know this unless they are taught how to avoid plagiarism, a lesson that has to begin as early as we demonstrate to students how to research topics.

Christian is to be congratulated for bringing his valuable work to the attention of educators and students alike. Further, his message is powerful. When we widen our vision and "connect" young writers across all boundaries to reflect on a specific piece of literature and relate this to their own life experiences, these writers find a real purpose for communicating. The end result is a greater understanding of ourselves and the world around us. What a creative process!

I found this work fascinating because I once did a research study on writing and creating a story on the computer; the general result was that the university students really didn't like composing on the computer and found it difficult to create spontaneous text. The reason I found Christian's book so compelling is that the students' writing was really putting into "keystrokes" their verbal responses – they were "talking", using their fingers on the keyboard. Their conversations were committed to writing, which is marvelous.

This was a refreshing and rewarding review for me because Christian's book is a report on the results of written responses from remote online reflections and reactions to the reading of a book written fifty years before – that of Anne Frank's *Diary*. Very revealing! A renewal of the three!

I recommend this book unreservedly.

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