This is “My Letter to the World”- Middle School Student Letters to Ukraine Peers

Model for Integrating Literacy and Authenticity into Social Justice and Humanitarian Projects

While schools from 6-12 increasingly embrace the concept of nurturing community and global citizen projects, the projects produced are usually school site exhibits or online websites or the raising of needed monies or collecting goods or supplies for worthy causes. Obviously each of these outcomes realizes the authentic goals of a local or humanitarian project, but at Ditmas IS 62 we have effectively developed a very accessible and meaningful literacy driven tool for student emotional authentication of their global citizenship. How can explicit literacy instruction figure into making humanitarian grassroots come “real” for students 6-12 in addition to funds raised or good collected? By using a cost free basic English tool, which is taught in all ELA classes and necessary for success in the real world of work and community living? What is that tool? The highly familiar and accessible letter.

But the letter format used, while it can indeed be an ordinary functional document one, can also draw on an acclaimed poetic one. Ditmas IS 62 students wrote letters directly to the children of Ukraine detailing the empathy and compassion felt for the peers as the war displaces them or renders them refugees.

The students inspired by the format of Emily Dickinson’s “This is my letter to the world” (<https://www.brinkerhoffpoetry.org/poems/this-is-my-letter-to-the-world>) shared their own life experiences as diverse young persons. Many had moved multiple times, been displaced, been refugees or come from families of former refugees.

Mr. Carideo, Social Studies Educator, and Dr. Reissman,

Literacy and Social Studies Educator, used breaking online footage and updated online and print resources to immerse

students in exactly what was happening as the war which started in February 2022 continued forward. Among the stories and images which helped the students formulate their letters to Ukraine peers and families were: a cellist playing amid the ruins of the war (<https://youtu.be/vPDGhZh9weE>), a child who sang “Let it Go” to comfort adults at a shelter during a bombing (<https://youtu.be/3R5MquixxVDQ>), a drummer playing a Bon Jovi American r rock song- “It’s My Life (https: [www.aol.com/bon-jovi-shares-video-ukrainian-144852764.html?soc\_src=aolapp](http://www.aol.com/bon-jovi-shares-video-ukrainian-144852764.html?soc_src=aolapp))and images of exiting refugee mothers and children pulling their possessions in single bags (even smaller than student backpacks <https://images.app.goo.gl/T499HoFtwDiSiiLd9>).

With the explicitly targeted goal being the students writing their own letter to their peers in the Ukraine, this single –two period experience was offered using these steps:

1. Students looked online at the format of the 19th of Emily Dickinson’s “This is My Letter to the World” poem.
2. They talked about their own experiences as young persons of middle school age who have moved many times or come from families which have shifted geographically. Not everyone spoke aloud but all listed to the students who did. Everyone processed what was said aloud. Everyone was encouraged to reflect on the individual’s experiences.
3. Students looked at the map as displayed on the Smartboard. Each class saw the countries and the route the families fleeing were taking.
4. Everyone watched the online digital resources shared as well as got any up to date refugee numbers data and war data for that calendar date.
5. Students were then given a template with starter frame sections as follows:

This is my letter to the children and families of the Ukraine:

My name is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

I am from \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

I empathize with you because \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
sincerely,

They were also encourage to draw an illustration if they wished or import a graphic.

1. After the template was discussed and it was made clear to students, they could add to it as needed, they were given a follow-up period to author their person letters.
2. Midway during the follow-up period, the students who wanted to were invited to read their responses aloud.

Of course, not every letter to the world humanitarian campaign will focus on the Ukraine war (indeed it is to hoped that will end with their victory as a nation in preserving the country’s freedom). The basic template of the letter format above will work for any project since it includes a personalization component in which the student identifies individual ethnic background and cultural background. The letter format above compels the student writer to explain the emotional and if relevant or possible the actual connection the US student can make to the situation the peer in another country or within this country is experiencing. The frame of the letter gives the student a prompt from which individual student details can be added. The space allotted for an illustration allows students who react visually or whose English vocabulary is not sufficient to express their ideas or emotions (ESL or special needs) to equally validate their participation in the project.

The “my letter to the world” Ukraine Project evoked deep strongly felt reactions demonstrating empathy and compassion from the Ditmas students.

 These are but a very of the written letters:

1. My name is Graci Wentt. I am from Emilia –Romgana. I empathize with you because I moved from place to place when I was younger. I am so sorry you are being displaced and treated as though your life does not matter. Things will get better. You will eventually be safer. May god bless you all.
2. My name is Sehar Syed. I am from Pakistan. I empathize with you because I understand what you are going through. I had to leave my home, friends, and loved ones. You too have left because of war and destruction. I am sorry for what you are going through. I hope things get better for you. You are never alone.
3. My name is Eric Ou. I am from Brooklyn. I emphasize with you because you were forcibly displaced in the Ukraine. I on the other hand, here in Brooklyn, am able to move as freely as I wish. Yet I know what it is to long for someone and to love that person who is far away. My someone is slowly healing in China. From the bottom of my heart, I‘m praying for all of Ukrainian person’s safety.
4. My name is Aziza Akbarkhanova. I am from Uzbekistan. I emphasize with you because during the beginning of the Covid pandemic, I was in lockdown as some of you are now. Your situation is different because you are in the middle of a war. I hope you can go back to middle school soon. I hope the war calms down and you get to have a normal middle school experience.
5. My name is Niloy Bhuiyan. I am from Bangladesh.

I emphasize with you because of the experience of my parents. My parents left our home country so that me and my siblings could have a better life. You are being forced out. I know how scary and stressful your life is now. I really hope you can stay strong and fight back.

These sample student letters to their peers to be sent to the UNICEF website and posted on two school websites as well as published in the school newsletter, allow the students to tap their own backgrounds and life experiences to reach out to their suffering Ukraine peers. As validated through majority participant middle school student responses, the 19th century Dickinson “my letter to the world” frame can be used to promote this generations bonds to their experiences and to connect them emotionally as caring compassionate global citizens with their international peers. Yes, student humanitarian social justice projects often can and should be evaluated in terms of the monies raised or artistic posters developed or canned goods and medical supplies collected. But is the “my letter to the world” format integrated literacy and emotions into supporting the emotional growth of the student as a caring human and global citizen. When students are given the opportunity to author their own missives to peers, empathy, compassion and connection can only build a better world for all.