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## Connecting Educational Dots with HSU Connect•Ed

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# CONNECTING EDUCATIONAL DOTS WITH HSU CONNECT•ED

By Stacy Becker

Last spring, as we all sailed into the murky seas of the pandemic, two things became increasingly clear: we would need to get by with help from friends and collaborators, and education needed to continue, from kindergarten to college, to keep students learning and community engagement alive.

HSU program staff recognized that many teachers at all levels, too, were facing a future lacking experience and resources in providing online learning experiences.

In spring 2020, HSU program staff and faculty came together to provide solutions, and began asking the questions such as, how would the hundreds of HSU

students enrolled in community-based learning courses each semester complete their service requirements? What kinds of virtual service would not only make sense and provide enriched learning opportunities for HSU students, but also meet K-12 school needs in these challenging times?

To address these needs, the Center for Community Based Learning, the Academic and Career Advising Center, Youth Educational Services (Y.E.S.), Early Outreach Admissions, and academic departments (including Social Work, Teacher Education, and other departments at HSU) offering Service Learning and Academic Internship courses, continued discussions with the Humboldt County Office of Education (HCOE) staff to initiate new efforts to enhance the bridge between K-12 and higher education institutions.

The HCOE Education At Work program developed a virtual College Chat series with local high schools that featured College of the Redwoods and HSU faculty sharing wisdom from their fields, and invited high school students into their virtual courses for the college experience.

“HSU faculty from over twenty different departments have participated in our College Chat series this year. These informal discussions give local high school students a chance to learn about different majors and ask questions directly to professors who teach college classes,” College Chat program lead Jim Ritter shared. “This is a wonderful community partnership between HSU

and Humboldt County high schools that helps students relax and build confidence about their transition from high school to college.”

At HSU the new ConnectED program evolved to further education efforts, and make connections between HSU students, resources, and local K-12 classes.

During the pilot fall 2020 semester, two main ConnectED programs emerged: Pen Pals and Curricular. HSU students from Y.E.S. programs and academic courses such as: Art Education, Environmental Science and Management, Recreation Administration, and Child Development, rallied to provide activities that supported K-12 teacher learning objectives.

In the ConnectED Pen Pal program, HSU students participated in letter-writing experiences, initially with 5th grade classes. The letters provided an opportunity for K-12 students to improve communication skills and learn about the college experience, while allowing HSU students to make community connections and build relationships with K-12 students.

Cuahutemoc Flores, Y.E.S. student and ART Program

Director, highlighted the gifts and challenges that came with virtual activities. “My experience with the letters last semester worked as a friendship check-in with my 10 year-old Pen Pal,” Flores shared. “I don’t know what they look like or sound like, but I know that there’s a ten-year-old out there who rides dirt bikes and watches kung-fu movies. Our letters combine dirt bikes and kung fu with passion for art, recreation, theater and imagination; we try to include as much of that as we can.”

“The most valuable thing I’ve learned about the Pen Pal Program is that education needs to be fun because people are more likely to satisfy their thirst for education and social engagement if they’re presented with clear information that connects the dots and in a form that’s enjoyable,” Flores shared. “In a letter I wrote to my Pen Pal, I was telling them that we can find art tools anywhere. We can use flower seeds so that they sprout a pattern, use rocks to balance on their sides to make towers, or use clay from the ground to do street art and natural paints.”

In the ConnectED Curricular program, HSU students created materials such as educational videos, class activities, lesson plans, and virtual presentations in response

“Despite the age difference between a 5th grader and a college student, there is still so much we can learn from each other. It’s possible to find common ground with just about anybody. Exchanging Pen Pal letters was such a cool way of engaging with and staying connected with youth in the local community.” - Ada Mittelstadt, HSU Y.E.S. ART Program Director (Fall 2020)



to K-12 teacher requests for specific academic, college readiness, personal and professional growth topics.

Carol West, HSU Child Development (CD) faculty member, noted the gap filled by ConnectED offerings. Two of her students had the opportunity to create curricular resources for K-12 classes. "If the students had not had this opportunity to participate virtually in the classroom, they would not have had hands-on experience with teaching, which is the whole point of CD 482 Directed Field Experience/Internship," West shared. "Both of these students will be going into credential programs. In the midst of a pandemic, any kind of hands-on experience with children is quite limited, so this was an invaluable experience in conducting lessons in a virtual environment. Both students are graduating at the end of this semester. This was an amazing way to end their time at HSU, particularly considering the circumstances!"

ConnectED has been building bridges to provide college readiness support to local high school students. Molly Pucillo, member of the HSU Early Outreach staff, and part of the ConnectED organizing team, shared that "the pandemic has forced us to be more collaborative and creative, and the ConnectED initiative and team model these virtues."

"ConnectED has been a powerful partnership for Early Outreach Admissions because it has intentionally and consistently created more opportunities for local students and educators to access college resources and collaborations," Pucillo shared. "It has similarly provided opportunities for HSU faculty and staff to diversify and augment their curriculum through practical application and relationship building efforts. In short, ConnectED has provided stability and connection in a time when it has been greatly needed."

An additional one-time effort was made during fall 2020 by HSU Religious Studies faculty member Sara Hart, who coordinated with the local American Legion to educate youth on veterans' related topics via American Legion Art and Essay Contests for grade schoolers.

The turnout of all constituents for these programs demonstrates the mutually beneficial collaboration succeeding since their inception. In fall 2020, 97 HSU students and six faculty, from six Service Learning, Academic Internship courses, and Y.E.S. programs, served 362 K-12th grade students. These students were from 13 different classes taught by 12 teachers at nine local

schools. The spring 2021 semester is continuing to see HSU students connect with local K-12 students, with 80 HSU students and seven faculty from five majors with the Y.E.S. programs serving students in 12 different K-12 classrooms at ten local schools.

Upon conclusion of the first semester of the ConnectED programs during fall 2020, over 90% of Y.E.S. students agreed that the ConnectED experience helped expand their interpersonal, communication, creative thinking, and mentoring skills. Many of the students felt more connected to both HSU and the local community, and engaged while virtually volunteering.

After participating in the ConnectED experience, Y.E.S. Youth Mentoring Program Director for the fall 2020 semester, Emily Eib recognizes "how important it is to stay connected with youth and provide outlets for them to stay engaged during online learning," Eib shared. "They loved letter writing so much and it made me so happy!"


Jacquelyn R. Matthews, Y.E.S. ART Volunteer during the fall 2020 semester, felt that the ability to mentor and volunteer in a variety of settings was a valuable experience. "This would be something great to include even after covid restrictions are lifted," Matthews shared.

The efforts will continue on in future semesters and beyond the pandemic due to the successes of the program. "The Pen Pal program has been such a bright spot for Y.E.S. volunteers this year," Melea Smith, Y.E.S. Coordinator shared. "It has fostered enjoyment, creativity and connections for college and elementary school participants. While this effort emerged in response to social distancing measures, we hope to continue the Pen Pal program at Y.E.S. beyond the pandemic. The digital letter exchange has created new avenues for building community with local schools, especially those at a greater distance from HSU."

Other HSU faculty were pleased by the efforts as well. Environmental Science & Management (ESM) faculty Jenn Tarlton shared positive outcomes from the experience for all involved. Her ESM 450 Applied Environmental Education and Interpretation course students engaged in a hybrid of Pen Pal and curricular activities: they each exchanged three letters with their middle school partners from Redwood Coast Montessori, and they made video prompts for each letter exchange.

"I'm really glad we did this project," Tarlton shared. "This semester my students really missed out on proj-





ects where they would be making connections with 3rd and 5th graders. This Pen Pal project helped them remember what it's like to be a middle school student as well as make meaningful connections to youth in our community... For me, I actually met two course objectives: 1) connecting with K-12 students in a meaningful way and 2) developing video production skills. Several of my students said this was their favorite project of the semester... The teacher of the middle school students, Sheree Shapiro, expressed how much her students got from the Pen Pal experience and how much they enjoyed the project."

Shapiro agreed that the ConnectEd Pen Pal was beneficial to her students as well. "Because Covid-19 has limited us all from interacting with each other in groups, popular and rewarding programs such as Environmental Education Day have typically been put on hold," Shapiro shared. "On the other hand, Covid-19 has given many of us an opportunity to adapt and find new ways to do our jobs, teach and learn information, and find ways to connect with and support each other in new settings."

"The HSU students provided human connection and offered guidance for ways the adolescents could seek peace and care for their mental, physical, and emotional well-being while learning about the Earth in engaging ways," Shapiro shared. "They sent a Flipgrid video to the middle school students offering relevant lessons, like addressing air quality during the fires and addressing the ocean and moon during the King Tides, and inspired by a popular anime series, Avatar the Last Airbender. Their lessons connected in powerful and entertaining ways with the middle school students. Middle school students eagerly meditated barefoot in the sand, interpreted the air quality index, and used tide and moon data to draw correlations. The adolescents shared in their letters how meditating by a tree or deeply breathing while standing barefoot in the sand affected their mental, physical, and emotional states. Some were motivated to work outside more often and make deep breathing part of their ongoing stress management strategy. HSU students listened to albums recommended by their Pen Pals and wrote back about a favorite song. Students from both schools shared their feelings about being an athlete, an artist, an immigrant, a cook, a tech geek, a son, a sister, a pet owner, a friend,

and more. In the process, everyone involved learned, grew, and enjoyed being part of a stimulating and supportive community."

Check out the following Flipgrid videos created by Tarron's students (in order to view these flipgrid videos, you will be prompted to join with Google or Microsoft):

<https://flipgrid.com/ba20c575>: created by Amelia Towse, Samantha Mariscal, Sarah Feyers, Emily Ortow. Compares tide charts with phases of the moon to learn about the moon's effects on tides; provides a Pen Pal prompt.

<https://flipgrid.com/025b5a19>: created by Charlotte Maupin, Isabelle Otillo, Mayra Guzman, Natalie Rynne, Lauryn Blottin. Shares information on Air Quality Index (AQI), while providing meditation prompts for dealing anxieties arising from wildfire and pollution events.

Other K-12 teachers shared the positive impacts on their teaching efforts and their students' perspectives. Michelle Butler, 5th Grade Teacher at Pacific Union Elementary stated, "Some of my least active distance-learning students were the first to respond to their Pen Pals. Following this, we did a Secret Pal letter exchange in December among our own students and they were inspired to write for connection in large part, I believe due to their experience with HSU Pen Pals."

Jesse Wheeler, 4th grade Teacher at Cutten Elementary also appreciated the multiple outcomes with her students: "My 4th graders learned about the diverse backgrounds of the HSU students and how they chose their college majors. The HSU students shared insights about what college majors are, what recreation means, and the concepts of Leave No Trace. All together, these lessons exposed my students to the higher education experience while covering topics in their Social Science standards. They also encouraged my students to get outside in a respectful, responsible way."

For more information on ConnectED and more beautiful examples of Pen Pal letter exchanges visit: <https://cbl.humboldt.edu/ConnectED>.



Oct. 26, 2020

Hi Aliyah,

It's great to hear from you! Thank you for your letter! How are you?

I'm glad to hear that online school is going well for you and it's cool to hear about what you're learning in your classes. Online school is going well for me too, although I much prefer it being in person. I miss walking on campus and seeing everyone face to face. I chose to go to HSU for college because I love this area with all the redwoods and the ocean. It's so beautiful! I wanted to leave the small town I grew up in, but stay in California. I am in my very last semester of college so I am graduating in December! It's hard to believe but I think I am ready for the next step of my life. Do you know what you want to be when you grow up? I still don't know, I'm just figuring my life out as I go.

I mostly go for hikes in the Arcata Community Forest and I also really like the hike up to Strawberry Rock because the view is amazing. Have you been there? Are there any particular places you like to go? What's your favorite beach? I grew up in a small town that is in the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas on the way up to Tahoe, so there are a ton of great hiking trails around there too.

My birthday is in December. I don't have any pets, but I love cats. When I was younger, my family had chickens that laid eggs for us and they were kind of like pets, they all had names. We had a really aggressive rooster too. I like to knit small soft cotton washcloths, but someday I want to learn how to knit hats and socks. I like to play card games and boardgames too. I especially like cards. I used to play cards a lot with my dad when I was younger, sometimes I still do when I am back home. I'm not reading anything at the moment because I have been really busy, but I have been meaning to read a biography about the artist Frida Kahlo.

My sister Annabel goes to HSU too and we like to do all kinds of things together. Sometimes we go on hikes or to the beach, and sometimes we make dinner together, and sometimes we play games, but mostly we just hang out and talk. I think of her as my best friend. Someday I'd love to travel with her. Where would you want to travel to if you could go anywhere in the world?

I hope you are doing well and have a great day!

- Ada

Here are some pictures of some of the art I've made and some washcloths I knitted :)



## ConnectED Pen Pal Letter

from HSU student,  
Ada Mittelstadt  
(fall 2020 Y.E.S. Art  
Program Director),  
to student Aliyah  
in Cheryl Paul's  
5th grade class  
at Pacific Union  
Elementary

Dear Amara,

It's been a pleasure getting to know you too!

Wow! That sounds almost more fun than normal Halloween. I'm glad you got to spend some time with your friends! In my opinion, that's what holidays are really for. Unfortunately, I didn't get to go home to see my friends for Halloween, but I had a fun party on ZOOM with all of the other YES volunteers. I dressed up like a skeleton and we played Kahoot.

Right now, I have a lot of different projects I'm working on, but I just finished one of my cups for my ceramics class and I'm really proud of it! It's a cup that looks like an eyeball! Spooky! I really love how it turned out. Also since my last in person class for Ceramics was on the 17th I painted my nails.

Again, it's been really fun getting to know you. It was one of my favorite parts of this semester. I loved reading about what you guys were learning. I hope you have a really fun rest of the year! Also, I'm writing this before the zoom meet and greet, so while this is my last letter, I look forward to seeing you there!

Sincerely,  
Vanessa



## ConnectED Pen Pal Letter

from HSU student,  
Vanessa Ebbing  
(fall 2020 Y.E.S.  
Environmental  
Education Program  
Volunteer), to  
student Amara  
in Cheryl Paul's  
5th grade class  
at Pacific Union  
Elementary

### **ConnectED Partnerships:**

Jana Ashbrook - Staff, Early Outreach Admissions  
Stacy Becker - Staff, Center for Community Based Learning  
Tyler Bradbury - Staff, Teacher Education  
Loren Collins - Staff, Center for Community Based Learning; Faculty, Political Science  
Isaac Coppock - Faculty, Child Development  
Mary Dingle - Faculty, Teacher Education  
Yvonne Doble - Staff/Faculty, Social Work  
Kelly Fortner - Staff, Center for Community Based Learning  
Sara Hart - Faculty, Religious Studies  
Sei Hee Hwang - Staff, Academic and Career Advising Center  
Libbi Miller - Faculty, Teacher Education  
Whitney Ogle - Faculty, Kinesiology  
Ara Pachmayer - Faculty, Recreation Administration  
Cyndy Porter - Community Partner, Humboldt County Office of Education  
Molly Pucillo - Staff, Early Outreach Admissions  
Meenal Rana - Faculty, Child Development  
Jim Ritter - Community Partner, Humboldt County Office of Education  
Karling Skoglund - Community Partner, Humboldt County Office of Education  
Melea Smith - Staff, Youth Educational Services  
Sara Sterner - Faculty, Teacher Education  
Jen Tarlton - Faculty, Environmental Science and Management  
Julie Van Sickle - Staff, HSU Natural History Museum; Faculty, Environmental Science and Management  
Carol West - Faculty, Child Development  
Jim Woglom - Faculty, Art and Teacher Education