

# e-mates @ Kempsey High School

*Linda Sneddon, teacher librarian at Kempsey High School, describes her wonderful experiences with students engaged in reading and sharing their reading journeys with online mates.*

## Introduction

**I**n 2006, I returned from a teacher exchange in Vancouver feeling inspired and eager to reconnect with the staff and students at Kempsey High School. I had just experienced a year of the best possible professional development I could imagine and felt keen to ensure that this enthusiasm continued. When I got back, I discovered how fortunate it was that my school had successfully applied to participate in a *Quality Teaching* action learning project. The project, titled *One size does not fit all!*, focused on gifted and talented education and the use of communication technology. Both areas had been focuses of my work and professional learning while on exchange and allowed me to bring another perspective to the project. My role in the project was to work cooperatively with other teachers in developing units of work that would improve the learning outcomes of students identified by ELLA, SNAP and SMART data, as being in the upper bands. The e-mates (email pen-pals) program was one of these units of work and for me, as teacher librarian, the most rewarding. It gave me the opportunity to work closely with staff and students, to re-establish my role in the school after a year away, and to instil a love of reading in students.

## Quality Teaching action learning 2006/07

Our action learning project was devised and managed by the Deputy Principal, Nerida Moseley. Team members were involved in weekly progress meetings as well as workshops where we studied the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) modules 1–6 *Gifted and Talented Education 2005* and participated in technology training through the *Intel®* program. We then formed teaching partnerships and were provided with the opportunity to cooperatively program and plan units of work. Our academic partner, Bronwyn McLeod, an authority on gifted and talented education, provided guidance and ensured that our programs included a variety of activities that provided opportunities for higher order thinking skills to be developed. During our weekly meetings, we also recorded our journey and shared our progress.

## The e-mates program begins

The e-mates program aims to promote reading for pleasure and generate a buzz about books and the library for learning and leisure. The program

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targeted Year 9 students nominated as gifted or talented by their English teachers. This was a group of students I had lost contact with during my year on exchange. It was decided that they would come to the library for two periods a week during Extension English time with English teacher Sue Tassell. Through my exchange teaching contacts, I organised a group of students from Birmingham to become their e-mates. The students chose the name, e-mates, based on the Aussie habit of calling a friend a mate and, because we would be communicating by email (Figure 1). Parents were sent an information letter and permission note to sign, and students made a commitment to read, respond and relate.

## What is the e-mates program?

The e-mates program involves wide reading and chatting about books by



Figure 1 The e-mates home page

email with students from another country. We have been involved with schools in England and Canada since the program commenced and students gain much from the cultural exchange. During class time, students are involved in a book discussion at the beginning of each lesson. These evolve from very quiet, reticent affairs to enthusiastically boisterous discussions of books as students become more comfortable with each other and realise their opinions will be valued. Whilst the content of these sessions is very student focused, the teacher's role of asking thoughtful questions can lead the students' thinking in new directions. We also found many opportunities to discuss welfare matters, such as bullying and peer pressure, in the context of the subject matter of certain books.

Each student keeps a journal (A4 art book) in which they create a profile of their e-mate, keep copies of their correspondence, locate where their friend's school is on a map and record their responses to the books they read. Students have a variety of response options to choose from. These cover a wide range of learning styles and they choose a different option for each book. An overview of all the response options is given at the beginning of the program (Figure 2). Then a more detailed scaffold of specific tasks is provided by the English teacher as a short segment in each lesson. Many of the journals are works of art.

The final task, designing a website to promote teen reading, is a whole group project. It is a rich task, designed to be enjoyable and requiring higher order thinking. The group learns how to use web design software and work together to develop an e-mates logo and website graphics. They are each responsible for three pages on the website including a book review page (Figure 3) and a reading rave page (Figures 4 & 5), in which they say why they read and why others should too. These pages are linked to our *Kempsey High School Library* website and are favourites amongst other students.

Figure 3 Katie's book reviews

Figure 4 Edwina's reading rave

Figure 5 Amie's reading rave

# e-mates

Your Extension English time, doing e-mates, is an opportunity to read, respond and relate.

We would hope that you would find 30 minutes a day to read, not just because it's part of the program, but because it's an enjoyable way to spend your free time! This might include RAK time and Extension English time but should also include some time at home. Think of it as an opportunity to turn off the TV and turn on your brain!!!

During Extension English we will be meeting in the Library and you should bring the book you are reading, your journal and any other materials you are using in your book response. The first 30 minutes of each lesson will be spent talking about books, sharing anecdotes about your e-mate and your journal responses. During the remainder of the lesson you are able to work at your own pace on whatever activity you've chosen, so you need to be organised. You might do some silent reading, e-mail your e-mate and/or work on a book response in your journal.

### Your journal should include:

- this information sheet
- an e-mate profile. Why not come up with 20 questions to ask your e-mate?
- copies of e-mails you've sent and received
- a map locating Vancouver in British Columbia, Canada
- a response to each book you've read (if you're reading more than two books a week you only need to do one response, though you are free to do more if you wish). Include the title and the author. See response options below.

### Response options (choose a different option for each book you read)

- visual response: use your imagination to respond to the book using illustration, paint, collage, symbols, words etc
- book review: imagine you are a panelist on the *First Tuesday book club* on ABC TV. Prepare a book review. Remember, you don't have to like the book you review but you do need to be able to justify your opinions and consider the role and responsibilities of being a critic!
- costume or set design
- author profile: Imagine you are a reporter for the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Produce an Interview with an author about his/her latest book (the one you've just read). Try to understand what has motivated and influenced them to write the book.
- make a mask or puppet that reflects the traits of one of the characters in the book
- word sleuth: identify 10 words from the novel that are new to you and look up the meanings. Include 10 words or phrases used by your e-mate that you hadn't heard before. Talk to your e-mate about what they mean. Are these words or phrases slang or msn/texting abbreviations? How does not understanding meaning influence our ability to communicate?
- write an alternate ending for the book. Try to maintain the voice used by the author.
- research some aspect of the book – the setting, the characters or an idea; eg, Jackie French's book *Macbeth* and son might make you want to find out more about Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* and the real historical person, Macbeth, who was nothing like the fictional character.
- imagine the book you've read is to be made into a movie and you are the scriptwriter and director. Who would you cast in the main roles and why? What aspects of the storyline would need to be modified or omitted? Would the ending stay the same? Justify your decisions.
- free choice – negotiated with the teacher.

### Whole group project – Rich task (a task designed to be fun but make you think)

- design a web site to promote teen reading using Dreamweaver software. Include reviews of books you have enjoyed and talk to your e-mates about including their comments.
- set up a folder in your personal space on the school network called e-mates. Save brief notes on books you read in a word document in this file for inclusion in the website and your journal. Copy book discussions you have with your e-mate into a word document for later use

All these tasks are designed to be fun and make you think. Aside from allowing time at home to read, all other tasks are designed to be completed in Extension English class time (you may need to organise materials from home if you are doing one of the practical options). Mrs Tassell will be scaffolding a different response option each week – showing you what to do. More important than any of the responses is that you get into the habit of reading and find books you love.

Mrs Sneddon

Figure 2 The e-mates program provides the students with a wide variety of response options

## Program spin-offs

Our Year 9 e-mates program was so successful that the students agitated to be allowed to continue with it the following year, so we devised a Year 10 program with a new final group task. Working cooperatively with another English teacher, Jeannine Kennedy, we devised a Year 8 program called *Novelty* as a lead in to e-mates. The e-mates program now has a life of its own with students asking whether they can be part of it and joining our lunchtime book groups.

The original program is also evolving. We are hoping to move towards blogging instead of email and to use the Connected Classroom's video conferencing facilities in the future.

## Positive outcomes

When the original e-mates group was invited to participate in the program, they were very hesitant. Reading was seen as nerdy and only two of the nominated students admitted to

reading fiction for pleasure. We hooked them with the idea of e-mailing students in other countries and learning to design web pages, but in the end it was the reading that really kept them involved and engaged. They still come to lunch time Book Group whenever their Year 12 commitments allow it. They became advocates for reading and borrowing, and still talk to students of all ages about good books to read.

The program has run for three years now and we have seen a huge increase in library usage by students during lesson breaks, and also in our *OASIS Library* loan statistics. Parents and staff have also commented on what a catalyst the e-mates program was in engaging students and themselves in reading. One of the anecdotes to come out of the program was about the Mathematics teacher who took students beach walking for sport and became involved in their discussions about books as they walked. She rediscovered how much she enjoyed

reading and looks forward to her weekly book chats at sport. The English teachers have also reported a noticeable difference in the quality of responses they are getting from those students who were part of the e-mates program, and that there is also a flow on effect to those not directly involved. After many years of implementing new technology into the library it has been very rewarding to return to promoting reading and being part of a buzz about books. It has been a reminder that a love of reading is at the core of lifelong learning and that technology can be an effective tool in achieving that goal. ■

### References and further reading

- Maugle, G. (2006) 'Creating a culture of change through integrating ICT', *Scan* 25(2), pp. 7–9.
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