

# Let Their Voices Be Heard



**Tantasqua Regional  
Junior High School  
Fiskdale, Massachusetts**

*Subject Area*  
Language Arts

*Area of Service*  
Human Need

*Grade Level*  
Middle School, Grade 7

*Author of Project*  
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## In Brief

“Let Their Voices Be Heard,” a Christa McAuliffe Fellowship Program sponsored by the Massachusetts Department of Education, promotes service-learning while providing the seventh graders at Tantasqua Junior High in Sturbridge an opportunity to develop their narrative writing skills by authoring the biography of a local veteran or senior citizen. This real-life writing project has expanded the walls of the classroom to include a local nursing home and a VA hospital and has enriched many lives.

## Learner Outcomes

Students learn to:

- Utilize the writing process to transfer accounts of oral history to written documents;
- Increase recognition of local veterans, senior citizens, and town officials;
- Provide an avenue for student publication and community awareness; and
- Apply problem-solving strategies to real life situations.

### MASSACHUSETTS CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK CONNECTIONS



This unit is aligned with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. Listed are the subject areas and the learning strands addressed:

#### English/Language Arts

Language strand: 1, 3, 5

Literature strand: 11

Composition strand: 21, 22, 23

Media strand: 26

#### Social Studies

History strand: 1, 3, 4

Civics and Government strand: 19

## OVERVIEW

## The Need

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“Let Their Voices Be Heard” creates a magical connection between students and senior citizens who may be veterans from the nearby VA Hospital, residents of the local nursing homes or seniors participating in Council of Aging activities. The project fills the void of isolation and leads to changed perceptions among the two different generations. Through the process of the interviews and biographies, students bring a sense of honor and value to the lives of senior citizens. As one elderly gentleman noted, “This project has made me feel needed.” Finally, doing oral histories promotes a sense of civic responsibility and enlivens the community’s history.

*We cherish our partnership with Tantasqua Junior High and we love to see the Tantasqua students.*

Anne Murray,  
VA Recreation Therapy  
Staff

## A CLS Response

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Prior to beginning the project, all stakeholders must first “come to the table.” Stakeholders include members of the Activities Department of the nursing home, residents, teachers, and students. All involved parties meet to discuss how the project will be executed and what strategies to employ as the project progresses. This process acknowledges that equality and mutual respect are the building blocks necessary for a partnership to evolve between the school and the nursing home.

In preparation for “Let Their Voices Be Heard” classroom teachers set the stage. The students compile interview questions and interview a classmate. They write biographies of one another to serve as models for the assignment ahead. Next, they read short works and children’s literature dealing with intergenerational issues. Classroom texts are used, as well as other resources. For example, the drama *Snow Flowers* by Amanda Gross is read from *Choices in Literature* (Prentice Hall, 1979). Children’s picture books often carry an important message. So, books like Tomie dePaola’s *Now One Foot, Now the Other*, and Farber’s *How Does It Feel to Be Old?* are shared. After discussing these works, the students compile a new list of interview questions to share with the senior citizens or veterans.

Preparing students academically is reasonable when the classroom is the only place of learning. However, additional preparation is necessary once the walls of the classroom extend to include a nursing home or medical center visit. Discussions outlining the students’ expectations include what to anticipate, what the facility is like, and a description of their biography partners. Making a list of the characteristics of aging often proves helpful. Students compile lists of characteristics of senior citizens and of early adolescents. These lists are set aside until after the first meeting. It is amazing what the students discover after the first visit. Students’ journal entries indicate they are reflecting on the legitimacy of stereotypes.

Considering the uniqueness of interacting with veterans, students and their partners brainstorm possible topics of interest such as patriotism and follow up by researching the issues. Books like *The Wall* by Eve Bunting are read. Copies of *Veterans’ Voices*, a veteran’s publication, are also discussed. The importance of conducting a sensitive interview is emphasized. Finally, in response to pre-interview anxieties, students role-play their interviews with classmates.

*I interviewed a woman named Beatrice May Young. . . . I liked listening to her tell her thoughts and memories. I believe that memories are the last thing to go, the last bit of magic that we have kept with us throughout all the years of our existence.*

Excerpt from the biography of Beatrice May Young by Caitlin Sporborg



*Masonic Home residents and middle school students share biographies.*

## Service Component

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When the project first began, it was known as the “Biography Project.” As it unfolded, however, many other layers to the service component added richness and depth. It quickly became a project that empowered the voices of both the students and the senior citizens. After hearing his biography read at a celebration, one of the veterans coined the new title for the project. He looked out at the students assembled in the recreation room and said: “I want to thank you for letting our voices be heard.”

In addition to presenting biographies to families of the senior partners, student biographies have been placed in the libraries of the various senior facilities in the community. Some have even found their way into the local town newspapers.

## Celebration

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The second phase of the project involves putting the finished biographies in a booklet assembled by the students. As a culminating activity, all the stakeholders in the project share in a celebration. The students visit the facility for a second time and read the biographies to the group, while their partners look on with admiration.

## OUTCOMES

### Academic Gains

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Students gain knowledge in the process of interviewing throughout this project. For some students, this is their first venture with interviewing. They discover that it is a valuable skill, and one that is not really threatening. In addition, students share various forms of literature to gain an understanding of an intergenerational theme or a veteran's theme. Utilizing the writing process, students complete the biographies and discover the value of an authentic audience. Since they are invested in the project, the quality of their writing improves.

For many students, their over-all rubric scores are higher when writing the senior citizen biographies than when writing the peer biographies. (This practitioner saw 62% of her students' scores increase with the senior citizen biographies during one year of this project). Through the integration of technology, students publish their revised and edited biographies on the computer. Finally, they experience a collaborative effort as they compile the booklets that they will present to the interviewees.

### Societal Gains

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Students become aware of the commonalities they share with senior citizens and/or veterans. They learn to respect these individuals and value them as members of a broader community. Through the biographies the students affirm their interviewees' lives and honor the voices of their partners. The biographies also open the door for further activities between the students and their partners. "Let Their Voices Be Heard" helps break down the stereotypes that students have of the elderly, and also breaks down the stereotypes that the elderly have of students. One student titled the biography that he wrote, "A Day with a Friend." That says it all.

### Community Partners

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The seventh grade students at Tantasqua Junior High share a common vision with the residents of Quaboag on the Common and the Northampton VA. Through the support and the collaboration of these institutions a partnership between the youth and the veterans of the area develops. This intergenerational unit focused on two area partnerships, providing the students an opportunity to write a biography of either a senior citizen or veteran. The Recreation Therapy Department at the VA and the Activities Department at the nursing home provided assistance in establishing this project in the facilities.

To establish community partnerships it is essential to include all the involved parties in the initial planning. As the project develops keep the lines of communication between partners open through regular updates. Displaying mutual respect and understanding for all parties models for our youth a life-long skill: how to live with other people.

TIES TO THE MASSACHUSETTS CURRICULUM FRAMEWORKS		
LEARNING STANDARDS/ OUTCOMES	ACTIVITY	ASSESSMENT
<p><b>English/Language Arts</b></p> <p><b>LANGUAGE STRAND</b></p>		
<p>Students will use agreed-upon rules for informal and formal discussions in small and large groups.</p>	<p>Working in cooperative groups the students will discuss books having an intergenerational theme.</p>	<p>Final scoring of biographies (rubric).</p>
<p>Students will make oral presentations that demonstrate appropriate consideration of audience, purpose, and the information to be conveyed.</p>	<p>Students will read the biographies at a special celebration for all the stakeholders.</p>	<p>Rubric for oral presentations.</p>
<p>Students will identify, describe, and apply knowledge of the structure of the English language and standard English conventions for sentence structure, usage, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling.</p>	<p>Students will engage in peer conference and group conference when rough drafts are completed. Self-editing and peer-editing follow.</p>	<p>Self-assessment and peer assessment.</p>
<p><b>LITERATURE STRAND</b></p>		
<p>Students will identify, analyze, and apply knowledge of theme in literature and provide evidence from the text to support their understanding.</p>	<p>Working in cooperative groups the students complete "Learning from another Generation".</p>	<p>Self-assessment and peer assessment.</p>
<p><b>COMPOSITION STRAND</b></p>		
<p>Students will demonstrate improvement in organization, content, paragraph development, level of detail, style, tone, and word choice in their compositions after revising them.</p>	<p>Process writing of biographies.</p>	<p>Refer to scoring rubric for theme.</p>
<p>Students will use knowledge of standard English conventions to edit their writing.</p>	<p>Students will use notes from interviews to write the biographies.</p>	<p>Use of analytic scoring rubric.</p>
<p>Students will use self-generated questions, note-taking, summarizing, precise writing, and outlining to enhance learning when reading or writing.</p>		

## LESSON PLAN Literature Connection

### Objective

- To understand theme in literature
- To work effectively in cooperative groups

### Learning Standards

English/Language Arts Framework: Literature Strand, Standard 11. Students will identify, analyze, and apply knowledge of theme in literature and provide evidence from the text to support their understanding.

### Materials

- Intergenerational literature (see addendum for Bibliography)
- Rubrics for students to view in order to understand criteria of assignment
- "Learning from Another Generation" group activity sheet.

### Procedure

- Students work in their cooperative groupings (usually teacher selected for balance).
- Reporter from group reads responses.
- Class continues with general discussion.
- Students review the directions on the group activity sheet "Learning from Another Generation."

### Assessment

- Performance rubric for evaluating paper.
- Behavior rubric for assessing group interaction.

## TIMELINE

The following is a brief overview of the project in hopes that any teacher could adapt the activity to his/her classroom. All the steps may be implemented or the teacher can select the desired steps.

### Week one

Students discuss interview techniques and compile possible questions to ask a student partner.

Students pair up and interview a fellow classmate.

Students spend the next three class periods writing the biographies of their classmates.

### Week two

Students read short stories and children's literature dealing with intergenerational issues.

Students work together to compile a list of interview questions to ask senior citizens.

### Week three

Students "get prepped" for a nursing home visit, or a visit to the VA, or an interview.

Students visit senior citizens at a local nursing home and spend time (about 1 hour) with their senior partner. Students, teacher and nursing home staff have a debriefing before students leave the nursing home.

The next day, students write a ten minute reflection on their nursing home visit.

*I think that this project helped me learn more about our elders. They know more than we think!*

Neal Casaubon,  
Student

## Assessment

This six-week unit, focused on oral and written communication, utilized rubrics to guide the students in the completion of their performance and authentic assessment pieces. During the process of gathering data for the biographies, students interviewed their partners, demonstrating their ability to communicate by asking questions in such a manner as to receive the specific information needed for their report. Using the writing rubrics and listing the descriptors matching each degree of achievement, students developed their writing skills. The final product, a performance assessment, was a book containing all the biographies written.

Throughout this project students are engaged in on-going reflection to assist themselves in processing their learning. Immediately following the interviews, a debriefing session is held to sift through all students' thoughts. A ten-minute freewriting exercise serves as a springboard for students to discuss issues concerning the elderly. At the end of the project, each student completes a reflection based on some directed questions (see below). This helps with the "so what?"/"now what?" questioning of the classroom activity. The reflection component of the project is an integral part of the process. This short unit involved a variety of assessments which allowed the students to demonstrate not only their skill development, but also the development in understanding human relationships.

### BIOGRAPHY PROJECT REFLECTION

1. What are some of your thoughts on the project now that it is completed?
2. Do you feel the project was successful? Why?
3. What were some of the good things about the project?
4. What skills were reinforced, or did you learn, by the project?
5. What kinds of things could be done to improve the project in the future?

## TIMELINE

### Week four

Students follow same procedure as in peer biographies; they spend three days writing biographies of their senior citizen partners. If the biographies are to be used as an assessment tool, there should be no teacher intervention. The students may conference with a peer, however.

After writing the biographies, the students write notes to their senior partners thanking them for the visit.

### Week five

Teacher uses rubric (Analytic Scoring Rubric) to score senior citizen biographies.

The same rubric may have been previously used to score the peer biographies several weeks earlier.

The teacher may wish to compare the scores of both biographies.

### Week six

Everyone involved in the project shares in a celebration at the nursing home ( or veterans' home or the school).

Students sit with their partner and read the biographies. Everyone chats and enjoys refreshments. Pictures are taken and hugs are numerous.

End of term: Students complete an end of term evaluation.

**CONNECTING TO MCAS: OPEN RESPONSE QUESTION****Compare / Contrast**

Write a thoughtful response to the following question. Consider it a service learning reflection piece:

Different cultures treat their elderly in different ways. For example, the Chinese culture views their elderly as great sources of wisdom. (Part a.) How do you think the American people view their elderly? Why do you think so? Give reasons for whatever you say; draw from your experiences. (Part b.) Develop a “community plan” that would either maintain the value we place on our elderly or improve it.

## Challenges

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Organizing students’ instructional time effectively is a recurring challenge for all classroom teachers. This standard-based unit is designed to take place over the course of six weeks.

Logistics are a concern when implementing service learning methodology in the classroom. Who is responsible for various tasks? How many students can visit one facility? How many facilities will be partners? Where are the partners located? How are students getting to the location? Transportation and time schedules are major concerns for the teacher.

Communication with community partners throughout the duration of a project to maintain a common vision and solve the unpredictable issues that arise is critical to the success of the project.

## Solutions

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Teachers often find themselves in need of more time. By eliminating certain facets of the program, this six week unit can be condensed. For example, the literature connections could be shortened or eliminated if a teacher desired. There are many options.

At Tantasqua Junior High, this project has been done with one class (usually 20-25 students). It is easier to match up twenty-five students with partners, than to find partners for a whole team of one hundred students. One way to include more students would be to put groups of students with one senior citizen or veteran partner. In that way, the biography project becomes a group project. The writing becomes a collaborative effort.

Ongoing communication between community partners fortifies the working relationship between the school personnel and the partner. Any combination of communication such as memos, phone calls, e-mail or meetings could be incorporated into a predetermined plan between partners for reporting the progress of the projects.

## Extending the Vision

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Tantasqua School District and its affiliates have been working on reversing the stereotypes that separate different generations and different groups of people. The community values the school's mission of bringing honor to people's lives through biography writing. We must always strive to let the "voices be heard."

Tantasqua Junior High continues to have a strong affiliation with Quaboag on the Common and the Northampton VA. As a result of "Let Their Voices Be Heard," additional projects have been included in the activities calendar for both facilities. Students, teachers, staff, and residents are working together to strengthen their relationship and broaden the students' experiences.

## IN CONCLUSION: School's Role in the Community

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"Let The Voices Be Heard" is a community service-learning unit that proves to be more than a means to improving written and oral communication. Through the students' reflections and the teacher's observations throughout the project three major changes were observed:

- 1) Students exhibited a true enthusiasm for writing and for the project.
- 2) The quality of the senior citizen and veteran biographies showed tremendous growth in the development of the students' skills. Sixty-two percent of the class participants scored significantly higher on the rubric scores, and their letter grade scores were all A's and B's.
- 3) Students demonstrated a positive work ethic.